The New Criterion

January 1991

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Volume 9, Number 5, $4.00

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The New Criterion *January 1991*

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Published monthly except July and August by The Foundation for Cultural Review, Inc., 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019, a nonprofit public foundation as described in Section 501 (c) (3) of the Internal Revenue code, which solicits and accepts contributions from a wide range of sources, including public and private foundations, corporations, and the general public. ISSN 0734-0222. January 1991, Volume 9, Number 5. Subscriptions: $32 for one year, $60 for two. Second-class postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Postmaster: send changes of address to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019.

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U.S.A. newsstand distribution by Eastern News Distributors, Inc., 1130 Cleveland Road, Sandusky, OH 44870. British distribution by Central Books Ltd., 14 The Leathermarket, London SE1 3ER. Available in microfilm from University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. All correspondence should be addressed to The New Criterion, 850 Seventh Avenue, New York, NY 10019. (212) 247-6980. Notice of nonreceipt must be sent to the Office Manager within three months of the issue date.

Advertising: Kate Shanley, 799 Broadway, Room 226, New York, NY 10003. (212) 477-4905.

The New Criterion is designed by Alvin and James Eisenman. It is set with the Flexicon Composer from Emerging Technology and is printed by Science Press of Ephrata, Pennsylvania.

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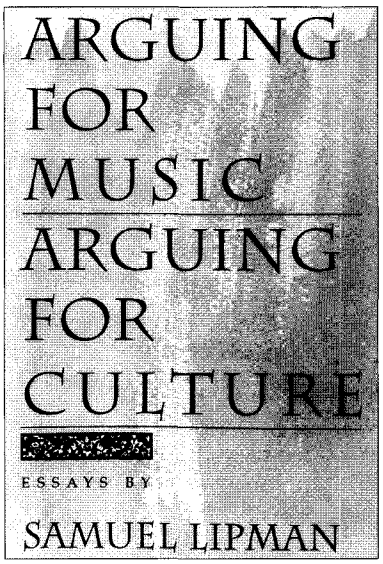
Arguing for Music / Arguing for Culture

Essays by Samuel Lipman



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"There are a few, a very few, music critics who would be well worth reading even if you were tone-deaf, and Samuel Lipman is undoubtedly one of them." — John Gross

Published in association with the American Council for the Arts

$35.00 hardcover; $19.95 softcover; 464 pages; index
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Notes & Comments: January 1991

Affirmative-action book prizes

After the successful campaign by a group of black writers to secure the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for fiction for Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, it should not have come as any surprise that the National Book Awards would be made the target of a similar political takeover. Indeed, given the momentum that such affirmative-action campaigns have lately achieved in virtually every sphere of American cultural life, the wonder is that it has taken as long as it has for the National Book Awards to be added to the roster of prizes and preferments that have now been so completely politicized that they have been rendered meaningless, even as *pro forma* guides to literary quality. With the awarding of the 1990 National Book Award for fiction to Charles Johnson, the black author of a novel called *The Middle Passage*, this prestigious literary prize has gone the way of the Pulitzer and so many others.

Whatever literary qualities Mr. Johnson's book may possess, it is clear that it came to the jury's attention primarily for what we might call its author's ethnic credentials. The whole sordid story was told in an unusually candid account of the fiction jury's deliberations in *The New York Times* for November 27, the day the jury was to meet over lunch to select a prize-winner. Under the headline, "Ideology Said to Split Book-Award Jurors," the story by Roger Cohen reported that the jury, which consisted of five writers, was split "by what one juror called 'deep ideological divisions,'" and went on to provide the following details:

> "There is acute dividedness over nearly everything," said Paul West, a writer who is a fiction juror. "I came out of the selection process for finalists feeling that only a couple of the five books represent my tastes, preferences and standards."

And further:

> Mr. West argued that "ethnic concerns, ideology and moral self-righteousness" compromised considerations of style and merit. He said there had been bitter conflicts, with himself and the writer William Gass on one side, and the other three jurors—Philip Lopate, Terry McMillan and Catharine Stimpson, the chairman—on the other.

From the list of five books that ended up as finalists for the prize, we were put on notice even in advance of the official decision that novels by white male non-minority authors were to be programmatically excluded from consideration. As Mr. Cohen reported in the *Times*, of the five books that made the final list, two were written by "Spanish-born" authors, one by a writer born in the Philip-

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pines, one by a white woman, and one by a black male. In other words, the customary considerations of race, gender, and ethnicity were rigorously in force, and questions of literary excellence discarded by the majority on the jury as irrelevant.

Blatant political assaults of this kind have long been standard practice in American academic life, where they have succeeded in making a mockery of intellectual standards —and indeed, in driving many gifted students out of the humanistic disciplines that have been so adversely affected by the new ideological imperatives. Now our major literary prizes have succumbed to the same political pressures, and we can be certain that this destructive process will meet with no resistance from the literary establishment. Silence and acquiescence will be the order of the day.

Yet now that the politics of affirmative action has finally destroyed the integrity of the National Book Awards, isn't it time for the literary world to acknowledge that this whole prize-giving system has simply degenerated into a program that includes mandatory "set asides" for a restricted group of "minority" writers and excludes other writers on the basis of race, gender, and ethnicity? Simple honesty would seem to require an admission that ideology has supplanted literary excellence as the basis for these prizes. Yet simple honesty in these matters is not nowadays to be found in our literary establishment.

The auction disasters

Whatever else may be said about the state of contemporary art as the new year begins, it looks very much as if the role played by the auction houses in overinflating the value of some already wildly overrated artistic reputations is going to be significantly diminished. As Judd Tully reported in a recent issue of *The Journal of Art*, "The bad news began at Sotheby's evening sale of November 6 . . . with 43 of the 77 lots failing to find buyers. The shocking buy-in rate of 56%, and a sales total that was exactly half of the lowest presale estimate, constituted an outright disaster." At Christie's there was a similar collapse in the contemporary-art market.

Included among the casualties at these auctions were works by such celebrated figures as Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Donald Judd, Anselm Kiefer, Julian Schnabel, Joel Shapiro, Robert Rauschenberg, Eric Fischl, Howard Hodgkin, Jennifer Bartlett, Elizabeth Murray, and Richard Tuttle. Not even the heretofore sacrosanct reputation of Andy Warhol escaped what one dealer called the "carnage" and a contemporary-art expert at Sotheby's described as "quicksand." What had looked like a sure thing only a couple of years ago turned out, as so many sure things in the art world of the 1980s have, to be a chimera.

This was bad news indeed for the traders in these hyped-up reputations. For the rest of us, however, the really bad news had begun much earlier on, when it had become standard practice for the auction houses—and not for them alone, of course—to promote the work of these artists as if they had already passed in the class of established old masters. This represented something more than an inflated market for a certain kind of art-world chic. It represented a fundamental distortion of artistic value. The wonder is not that the boom in these artificial reputations began to collapse at the first sign of a downturn in the economy but that it lasted for as long as it did at the absurd levels of money and adulation that had been reached.

It is far too soon, to be sure, to declare a definitive end to this runaway boom. What we are more likely to be seeing is the beginning of the end. An auction season that

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saw a work by Robert Rauschenberg bring $3.08 million, despite the other Rauschenbergs that bombed, and a work by Cy Twombly bring $4.84 million, a painting by Willem de Kooning $8.8 million, and even a Philip Guston abstraction $1.1 million, cannot be said to have fully returned to sanity. But what can be said with confidence is that something more than a few price levels has collapsed. What we have also seen beginning to unravel are some of the illusions that were spawned by the art scene of the Eighties. Whether this market "correction," as it has been called, brings in its wake a real correction of taste remains to be seen. It would be nice, anyway, to think that it might.

From the archives of the academy:

University of Toronto
Faculty of Music

Memo

FROM: Professor Jim Kippen
TO: All Faculty
DATE: September 24, 1990
SUBJECT: Visit of Dr Craig Woodson

Dr Craig Woodson, an ethnomusicologist trained at UCLA, will be in the Faculty of Music on Thursday, October 18, 1990, and will be lecturing to Professor David Elliott's Music Education class . . . as well as giving a lecture/demonstration and workshop in the afternoon. Essentially Dr Woodson builds instruments from around the world out of everyday household materials: disposable coffee cups, dental floss, chewing gum, packing tape, McDonald's drinking straws, etc. He uses these models amongst other things to demonstrate instrument technology and to test hypotheses on organological evolution. His products are extraordinarily effective. He plays the instruments, and often asks his audience to participate in his demonstrations by forming a world band on stage as he progresses through the various stages of his talk. . . .

[I]f you are free, please come along and join the fun!

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"Tenured Radicals": a postscript

by Roger Kimball

When *Tenured Radicals* was published in April 1990, many critics—including some who were generally sympathetic to the book's chief arguments—wondered whether recent developments in the academy were really quite as bad as I claimed. Surely, the argument went, professors of literature who specialize in the rock videos of Madonna are exceedingly rare; there can't be many professors who devote their scholarly energies to showing that *Paradise Lost* is a sexist document or that *The Tempest* is an exposé of Western imperialism; are there more than a handful who maintain that there are no compelling reasons for judging *Middlemarch* to be a greater artistic achievement than the cartoons of Bugs Bunny? And how many professors, really, would dismiss the traditional notion of literary quality and the ideal of disinterested scholarship as oppressive legacies of white patriarchal culture? Surely such professors are a tiny minority, freak or comical exceptions in an otherwise blandly moderate intellectual universe.

It would be consoling to think so. Unfortunately, subsequent developments in the academy have shown that if *Tenured Radicals* erred in its indictment, it erred on the side of understatement. It is not just that the peddlers of such politicized nonsense are in many cases among the most celebrated academics in the country: senior professors safely ensconced at Yale and Stanford, at Princeton and Harvard, Duke, the University of California, and other premier institutions, where they chair departments, sit on promotion and tenure committees, and busy themselves developing and implementing radical curricular changes for their own and other institutions. That was already clear in the late 1980s. Nor is it simply that, unlike most of their moderate colleagues, such tenured radicals tend to be indefatigable proselytizers, bent on winning converts in their war against the traditional moral and intellectual values of liberal-arts education. Troubling though that be, it, too, has been obvious for some time. Nor, finally, is it news that even the most bizarre writings and proclamations coming out of the academy, instead of being regarded as exotic or repellent curiosities, are often instrumental in setting the terms of debate both in the classroom and within the profession as a whole. No one familiar with the kind of thing that passes for scholarship today will be surprised to discover—to take just one example—that the presentation of a paper called "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl" at the 1989 annual meeting of the Modern Language Association was matched by a paper at the 1990 meeting on "The Lesbian Phallus: Or, Does Heterosexuality Exist?"[1] (One might have thought

1 This was the title of a paper in a session on "Lesbianism, Heterosexuality, and Feminist Theory." The other papers listed for this session—which by the way is not at all uncharacteristic of the offerings that the MLA has seen fit to make available to its members—are "Mapping the Frontier of the Black Hole:

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that the evidence for the existence of heterosexuality was well established, but evidence does not necessarily count for much among our new academic elite.)

All this is wearisomely familiar. What is new is the extent to which the constellation of radical trends that dominate the teaching of the humanities at many of our best institutions has found common cause in the rise of a new political ideology: the ideology of multiculturalism. Notwithstanding the emancipationist rhetoric that accompanies the term, "multiculturalism" as used in the academy today is not about recognizing genuine cultural diversity or encouraging pluralism. It is about undermining the priority of Western liberal values in our educational system and in society at large. In this sense, multiculturalism provides a convenient umbrella for the smorgasbord of radical ideologies now regnant in the academy. The one thing your literary deconstructionist, your Lacanian feminist, your post-structuralist Marxist, your New Historicist, and your devotee of what goes under the name of "cultural studies" can agree on is that the Western humanistic tradition is a repository of ideas that are naïve, repressive, or both.

At the center of the multicultural imperative is the assumption that all cultural life is to be explained in political terms, preeminently in terms of gender, race, class, and ethnic origin. In other words, categories of thought that have their home in the social sciences are imported into the arts and humanities and granted the status of golden explanatory keys. In good Marxist fashion, culture is denied autonomy and is reduced to being a coefficient of something else: class relations, sexual oppression, racial exploitation, etc. Questions of artistic quality are systematically replaced with tests for political relevance, even as the whole realm of aesthetic experience is "demythologized" as an insidious bourgeois fiction designed to consolidate the cultural hegemony of the ruling class. The thought that there might be something uniquely valuable about culture taken on its own terms, that literature, for example, might have its own criteria of achievement and offer its own distinctive satisfactions that are independent of contemporary political battles—none of this seems to matter or indeed to be seriously considered by our multiculturalist radicals.

Some partisans of multiculturalism will claim that in placing issues of gender, class, and race at the center of the humanities they are merely following a time-honored procedure for enriching their discipline by asking novel questions. Just as the New Critics of a previous generation enlivened literary criticism by focusing on verbal complexity, ambiguity, and irony at a time when philology and textual scholarship still ruled literary studies, so what we might call the New New Critics, marching under the banner of multiculturalism, are invigorating the humanities by concentrating on issues of gender, race, and class. The subjects addressed by their criticism may differ markedly from the subjects addressed by criticism of previous generations; the judgments made about what matters in literature and in life may differ radically as well; but that is only to be expected; in essentials, such critics are doing what humanists have always done: they are interpreting texts with the categories that seem most pertinent to contemporary experience.

So goes the argument when the new academic orthodoxy is challenged. But the difference is that whereas the New Critics drew on the essentially literary resources of rhetorical analysis to give us a deeper appreciation of literature, our multiculturalists employ the tools of ethnic and sexual redress in order to transform literature into a species of political propaganda and virtue mongering. Our appreciation of literature is not enhanced; it is canceled and replaced with something else. We are told that by concentrating on questions of gender, class, and ethnicity, multicul-

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Toward a Black Feminist Theory" and "Perverse Desire, the Lure of the Mannish Lesbian." *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, vol. 105, no. 6 (November 1990), page 1248.

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turalism provides new ways of looking at literature; in fact, literature per se never really comes into focus at all. The freedom that belongs to the exercise and experience of art is delivered over to a preordained set of political scenarios. The effect is to impoverish, not enlarge, our experience. Furthermore, the notion that criticism is a free-floating activity, equally valuable whether applied to comic books or to the poems of Dante, underscores the deep cynicism that characterizes so much academic criticism today. It is as if what is actually said, believed, or advocated in our critical judgments is somehow incidental to the character of the humanistic enterprise—as if the value of a particular interpretation were independent of its truth!

Implicit in the politicizing mandate of multiculturalism is an attack on the idea of a common culture, the idea that, despite our many differences, we hold in common an intellectual, artistic, and moral legacy, descending largely from the Greeks and the Bible, supplemented and modified over the centuries by innumerable contributions from diverse hands and peoples. It is this legacy that has given us our science, our political institutions, and the monuments of artistic and cultural achievement that define us as a civilization. Indeed, it is this legacy, insofar as we live up to it, that preserves us from chaos and barbarism. And it is precisely this legacy that the multiculturalist wishes to dispense with. Either he claims that the Western tradition is merely one heritage among many —and therefore that it deserves no special allegiance inside the classroom or out of it—or he denies the achievements of the West altogether. As a student at Williams College patiently explained to me when I spoke there recently about some of these issues, "You are telling us, Mr. Kimball, that we undergraduates ought to focus our attention on the monuments of Western civilization. But you don't seem to understand that Western civilization is responsible for most of the world's ills."

The sources of the multicultural animus against the West are varied. In its more radical versions, as the historian Diane Ravitch has pointed out in a perceptive essay on the subject, multiculturalism "has its roots in the ideology of ethnic separatism and in the black nationalist movement."[2] In this sense, multiculturalism denies the ideal of the United States as an integrated society in which peoples of different races, creeds, and ethnic backgrounds can live together in a state of social harmony. The multiculturalist replaces the traditional integrationist image of our society with the ethnically and racially divisive image of the United States as a kind of salad or mosaic: a potpourri of essentially unassimilable elements. Despite occasional rhetoric to the contrary, he scorns the motto *e pluribus unum*—out of many heritages, one society—in order to bolster ethnic, racial, or class-oriented fiefdoms. It follows that the multiculturalist will also have little patience with the idea of universal humanity. Corresponding to the attack on the idea of a common culture is a rejection of the idea of a common humanity. The multiculturalist rejects the idea that our identity as human beings transcends our membership in a particular class, race, or gender. On the contrary, for the multiculturalist what is important is not what binds us together but what separates us. And what separates us—be it gender, ethnicity, class, or race—is used as a totem to confer the coveted status of victimhood upon certain approved groups.

In order to appreciate what is at stake in the debate over multiculturalism, consider the phenomenon of Afrocentricity, one of the more extreme but also most influential manifestations of the multicultural ethos. The basic supposition of the movement for Afrocentricity is that Western culture is a bastardization of African, and especially Egyptian, culture, which in a highly innovative piece of ethnography is said to have been predominantly black. Consequently, black Americans—often referred to as "diasporan African people"—are enjoined to discard the "the preponderant Eurocentric myths of

2 Diane Ravitch, "Multiculturalism." *The American Scholar*, vol. 59, no. 3 (Summer 1990), page 342.

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universalism, objectivity, and classical traditions" and reclaim their proper intellectual, cultural, and spiritual legacy by returning to African sources.[3] What might be left of culture after dispensing with the "myths" of "universalism, objectivity, and classical traditions"—in other words, with rationality, science, and history—is never really discussed because the truly radical nature of the enterprise is never brought to light. One hears the call for Afrocentricity on many campuses, but—what is even more disturbing—it has so far been most successful influencing the curriculum in high schools around the country.

The journalist Andrew Sullivan provided a kind of introduction to the subject in his account of the Second Annual Conference on the Infusion of African and African-American Content in the High School Curriculum that was held early in November 1990 in Atlanta.[4] As Sullivan points out, the impetus for the conference was the Afrocentric aim to rid black education of "white influences" and "to transform the high school curriculum by giving it an exclusively Afrocentric base." A fantasy? In Portland, Oregon, a version of the Afrocentric curriculum informed by a document called the *African-American Baseline Essays* has already been adopted.[5] Similar documents are planned for other "geocultural" groups. The Portland curriculum, which has come to serve as a national model for curricular transformation, is being adopted at schools in Pittsburgh, Indianapolis, Atlanta, and Washington, D.C. In New York, a recent task force presided over by Thomas Sobol, State Education Commissioner, recommended sweeping changes in the teaching of history in New York schools in order to accommodate ethnic pressure groups and to root out what Commissioner Sobol called the "hidden assumptions of white supremacy" in the textbooks currently used.[6] And what is taught? Like much about Afrocentricity, it is beyond satire and would indeed be funny if it were not in earnest. In the *African-American Baseline Essays* students learn about the great "African-Jewish" scientist and philosopher Maimonides. Old Testament history is conveniently rewritten to portray the ancient Hebrews as guests, not slaves, of the Egyptian pharaohs. It is suggested that the "so-called Pythagorean theorem" was discovered—like just about everything else—by the ancient Egyptians. There is even a section on ancient "Egyptian Metallurgy and Electrical Engineering." Sullivan reports that ninth graders are to immerse themselves in the study of Egyptian hieroglyphics, cleansing rituals, and numerology. Students are taught that Greek philosophy was plagiarized from black African Egypt (Plato and Aristotle, it turns out, are figures of derision for Afrocentrists) and, more generally, that "all Western knowledge is a corruption of Egyptian, i.e., black African thought, and must therefore be junked." One charming participant in the conference explained this point as follows:

> When we adopt other people's theories, we are like Frankenstein doing other people's wills. It's like someone drinking some good stuff, vomiting it, and then we have to catch the vomit and drink it ourselves. . . . The Greeks gave back the vomit of the African way. . . . Don't become the vomit-drinkers!

Leave aside the objection that it was not Victor Frankenstein but his monstrous creation that the speaker has in mind here: who would expect someone who considers the Western European tradition of literature and philosophy to be a kind of vomit to bother to acquaint himself with any of it firsthand? The movement for Afrocentricity reminds one of

3 Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987, page 9.

4 Andrew Sullivan, "Racism 101." *The New Republic*, November 26, 1990, pages 18-21.

5 Michael D. Harris, et al., *African-American Baseline Essays*. Portland: Portland Public Schools, 1987; rev. 1990.

6 Karen Brady, "Principal Presses Indians' Place in Textbooks." *The Buffalo News*, August 21, 1990.

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nothing more than Evelyn Waugh's portrait, in his novel *Scoop*, of the Consul-General from the fictional African country of Ishmaelia haranguing passersby in Hyde Park:

> "Who built the Pyramids?" cried the Ishmaelite orator. "A Negro. Who invented the circulation of the blood? A Negro. Ladies and gentlemen . . . Who discovered America? . . . As that great Negro Karl Marx has so nobly written . . . Africa for the African worker, Europe for the African worker, Asia, Oceania, America, Arctic and Antarctica for the African worker. . . ."

The difference is that instead of being a novelist's wicked parody of certain fringe elements, the movement for Afrocentricity is a powerful ideology affecting the curricula in high schools and colleges across the country.

There is something grimly ironic about the spectacle of our new multiculturalists using ethnocentricism as a stick with which to beat the West. After all, both the idea and the critique of ethnocentricism are quintessentially Western. There has never in history been a society more open to other cultures than our own; nor has any tradition been more committed to self-criticism than the Western tradition: the figure of Socrates endlessly inviting self-scrutiny and rational explanation is a definitive image of the Western spirit. Moreover, "Western" science is not exclusively Western: it is science plain and simple—yes, it is "universal" science—which, though invented and developed in the West, is as true for the inhabitants of the Nile Valley as it is for the denizens of New York. That is why, outside the precincts of the humanities departments of Western universities, there is a mad dash to acquire Western science and technology. The deepest foolishness of multiculturalism shows itself in the puerile attacks it mounts on the cogency of scientific rationality, epitomized poignantly by the Afrocentrist who flips on his word processor to write books decrying the parochial nature of Western science and extolling the virtues of the "African way."

Despite the racist character of Afrocentricity, it pleases advocates of multiculturalism to present it and other forms of multiculturalism as prime examples of freedom, diversity, and tolerance. In order to understand what our tenured radicals mean when they use such words, let us remind ourselves of the ingenuous student from the University of Pennsylvania who made the mistake of expressing her "deep regard for the individual," only to be reprimanded by a university administrator who responded that the word "individual" "is a 'RED FLAG' phrase today, which is considered by many to be RACIST." As Professor Alan Charles Kors of the University of Pennsylvania has noted, the real lesson to be drawn from this episode —as from the many similar episodes that could be cited—is that the university "is a tolerant and diverse community, and if you do not agree with its particular notions of tolerance and diversity, it will gladly re-educate you."[7]

We were given a good sense of how the virtues of tolerance and pluralism have been faring in the academy when some professors at Duke University decided to establish a chapter of the National Association of Scholars this fall. The NAS is a group of tradition-minded teachers and scholars whose motto is "For Reasoned Scholarship in a Free Society." Among the faculty who organized the Duke chapter of the NAS was James David Barber, the eminent political scientist whose impeccable liberal credentials include leading a successful fight against establishing the Nixon library at Duke and serving as president of Amnesty International. Nevertheless, as soon as word got out that a chapter of the NAS was being established at Duke, the redoubtable Stanley Fish, chairman of the Duke English department, sent an anguished letter to a student newspaper, *The Chronicle*, in which he warned, among other things, that the NAS is "widely known to be racist, sexist, and homophobic."

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7 Alan Charles Kors, "It's Speech, Not Sex, the Dean Bans Now." *The Wall Street Journal*, October 12, 1989.

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Professor Fish was apparently so worried that reasoned scholarship in a free society might come to Duke that he also took it upon himself to write to the provost "advising him," as one commentator observed, "that faculty belonging to the NAS should not be appointed to key committees involving tenure or curriculum decisions."[8] Professor Fish denied proposing this. But he had made the error of sending copies of this missive to a handful of trusted colleagues, one of whom was upset enough at the suggestion that basic civil rights of Duke faculty members should be summarily abridged to suit Professor Fish's politics that he made the contents of the letter public. Hearing of Professor Fish's denial, an editor at *The Chronicle* commented, "It was really strange to hear him say that. We had the letter with his own words asking just that, right in front of us." But then we must remember that Professor Fish proudly identifies himself as a sophist, one who, in the classical formula, "makes the stronger argument appear weaker, the weaker argument appear stronger." Perhaps he should remind himself that what works between the covers of a contemporary text of literary criticism is not always so convincing when exposed to the steady, if pedestrian, light of common sense.

Embarrassing and, indeed, disappointing as Professor Fish's exhibition is—one might have expected a modicum of principled behavior from so gifted a scholar—what is most revealing about this new controversy at Duke is that those organizing support for the NAS are not arch conservatives but, by any conventional measurement, liberals. "What's happened to Duke," said one observer, is "the remaking of a mainstream university into a radical one—with terrible consequences—and I speak as a man who campaigned for George McGovern." The episode dramatizes the extent to which the traditional, moderate center of university life has been occupied by the new radicalism. As another scholar—one not, incidentally, affiliated with the NAS—put it: "Today they have something they should call the House *American* Activities Committee because people and ideas that are pro-American or pro-Western are now treated on the campuses as though they were some sort of subversive evil."

Notwithstanding the charges blithely hurled by Professor Fish and his allies against those supporting the NAS—"racist, sexist, and homophobic" for starters—the real battle that is now shaping up is not between radicals and conservatives but between radicals and old-style liberals. Or perhaps one should say that the classical liberal position—which fought for the ideals of quality, disinterested scholarship, and for advancement according to merit, not adherence to a given political line—is now castigated as conservative and reactionary. Professor Fish, for example, has gone to great pains to demonstrate that "there is no such thing as intrinsic merit," only conventional opinion. The result is that at many institutions any middle ground has been abolished. On the one side we have the remnants of the much besieged liberal tradition attempting to maintain traditional standards of civility and scholarship. On the other side we have the ruling academic clique, the tenor of whose educational philosophy was vividly summed up by Stanley Hauerwas, a well-known professor of theological ethics at Duke. When the controversy over the NAS broke out, Professor Hauerwas disparaged the educational goals of the NAS, explaining in a local newspaper that "The canon of great literature was created by high Anglican ---holes to underwrite their social class."[9] Edifying, is it not, to acquaint oneself with the table talk of our contemporary academic theologians?

8 Dorothy Rabinowitz, "Vive the Academic Resistance." *The Wall Street Journal*, November 13, 1990. Unless otherwise noted, quotations regarding this controversy are taken from Miss Rabinowitz's article.

9 Pam Kelley, "For Duke Profs, the Hot Debate is What to Teach." *The Charlotte Observer*, September 28, 1990.

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Professor Hauerwas's comment reminds us that a major issue in the whole debate over multiculturalism—as indeed in the controversy at Duke over the establishment of the NAS—centers on the question of the proper content of a liberal-arts education. For both better and worse, discussion of this question in recent years has crystallized around the word "canon." On the positive side, putting the traditional literary canon at the center of the debate effectively called attention to some of the more egregious assaults on the humanities in our colleges and universities. When professors of literature begin teaching Louis L'Amour—to say nothing of the rock videos of Madonna—instead of Henry James, when students begin reading Frantz Fanon instead of John Locke in their political philosophy classes, something has gone terribly wrong. And it is well to remember that instances of such pedagogical frivolity are now increasingly the rule, not the exception. A major legacy of the 1960s in the academy has been the destruction of standards. The very idea that some works might be more worth reading than others, together with the ideal of excellence that informs it, is regarded with suspicion as "hierarchical" and "elitist." Nowhere has this been more apparent than in the attack on the canon. Between the introduction of works of popular culture into the humanities curriculum and the unending search for works by authors of the requisite gender, skin color, sexual orientation, or ethnic heritage—between, that is, the trivialization and the politicization of the curriculum—the substance of liberal-arts education at many institutions has suffered catastrophic damage. Nowadays, many liberal-arts majors are being graduated having read little more than a handful of popular novels, a bit of esoteric literary theory, and various works that confirm their chosen ideological prejudices. The great works of the tradition remain, literally, a closed book.

Nevertheless, there are reasons to be uncomfortable about the prominence that the word "canon" has assumed in the debate over the future of the humanities. For one thing, by concentrating on *what* is taught critics have sometimes tended to slight the question of *how* teachers are approaching the material they teach. Few would deny Jane Austen a place in the canon; but "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl" does not exactly raise ones hopes for responsible pedagogy. Plato and Aristotle belong in any liberal-arts curriculum, but not as examples of how the white race has corrupted the wisdom of black Egypt. No author is immune to the depredations of ideologically motivated criticism, which is to say that our concern for the integrity of the canon must be a concern for responsible teaching as well.

It must also be said that the scramble to draw up approved reading lists has had the unfortunate effect of suggesting to some that those supporting the canon wish to impose a changeless tablet of previously certified texts on unsuspecting students. In fact, no serious commentator believes—or has said—that the canon is a sacrosanct catalogue of books that may never be altered or added to. But this not to deny that there is a body of works from the Western tradition that should form the core of a liberal-arts education, works that embody what Roger Shattuck, one of our leading scholars of modern French literature, has called "accepted versions of greatness," "scales of human eminence, qualities to admire and perhaps to emulate." [10] Of course, the number of books belonging to this core is far larger than the most voracious student could hope to master even if he were granted several lifetimes. In this sense, "being educated" is an ideal any one person can only aspire to. Yet when it comes to the content of a liberal-arts education—when it comes, that is, to the works and authors one should study in the four years of one's undergraduate career—decisions have to be made. The criterion is first of all not whether a given work is included on the Received List

10 Roger Shattuck, *Perplexing Dreams: Is There A Core Tradition in the Humanities?* American Council of Learned Societies Occasional Paper No. 2, 1987, page 6.

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of Great Books but whether it has proved to be of permanent interest. It happens that some works have demonstrated their insight, beauty, or truth to so many educated people for so long that failing to read them is tantamount to consigning oneself to the ranks of the ill-educated. My own view is that liberal-arts education should concentrate as rigorously as possible on works that have proved to be of permanent value; in practice, that means that few if any contemporary works should be part of the undergraduate curriculum. This is not to say that students shouldn't read contemporary fiction and criticism, or that they shouldn't go to the movies, listen to contemporary music, and generally immerse themselves in the life of the moment. In fact, any young person who is intellectually alive and curious will do so as a matter of course. But contemporary culture should not form the basis of a college education. One should look to the past, not to the streets, for the substance of the liberal-arts curriculum.

Some critics of *Tenured Radicals* have complained that the book fails to outline alternatives to the morass it describes—where by "alternatives" most seem to mean reading lists. But unless one subscribes to the ethos of multiculturalism, which looks to cultural politics instead of intellectual substance to dictate educational policy, the question of what one should read is not an esoteric matter. Nor is the rationale for a liberal-arts education. One reads as much of what has stood the test of time as one can, beginning if possible with the oldest and most influential books of the Western tradition; and one does so because one desires the gifts of a liberal education: knowledge, intellectual freedom, and a cultivated appreciation of the traditions that have been intrumental in forming our culture. If that sounds like a list of clichés, well, it is—just as any true description of what matters in education will be. It is in the nature of generalizations about life's difficult choices to be perfectly obvious, which is perhaps why both are so often confounded by those making a profession of sophistry.

John Searle, a professor of philosophy at the University of California at Berkeley and one of the most thoughtful critics of *Tenured Radicals*, put the conventional rationale for liberal education with consummate simplicity when he observed that

> there is a certain Western intellectual tradition that goes from, say, Socrates to Wittgenstein in philosophy, and from Homer to James Joyce in literature, and it is essential to the liberal education of young men and women in the United States that they should receive some exposure to at least some of the great works in this intellectual tradition; they should, in Matthew Arnold's overquoted words "know the best that is known and thought in the world." The arguments given for this view—on the rare occasions when it was felt that arguments were even needed—were that knowledge of the tradition was essential to the self-understanding of educated Americans since the country, in an important sense, is the product of that tradition; that many of these works are historically important because of their influences; and that most of them, for example several works by Plato and Shakespeare, are of very high intellectual and artistic quality, to the point of being of universal human interest.[11]

Until recently, as Professor Searle notes, this description would have seemed so obvious as to have been a "platitude"—which we might define as a statement sufficently self-evident that its utterance is superfluous.

It is a measure of how drastically things have changed that in the academy today Professor Searle's vignette would, as he acknowledges, generally be regarded as "wildly reactionary." Indeed, I can think of few major universities that would dare to endorse it, even as an educational platitude. (Seismic shifts in a culture's values show up first in its choice of platitudes.) From Socrates to Wittgenstein? Where are the women, the blacks, the Hispanics, the Asians? Ditto on Homer

11 John Searle, "The Storm Over the University." *The New York Review of Books*, vol. XXXVII, no. 19 (December 6, 1990), pages 34-42.

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to Joyce. Furthermore, why should a liberal-arts education focus on "the best" that has been thought and said? What about populations and points of view that have been "marginalized"? What about popular culture? What about Madonna? What about the tradition essential to *un*educated Americans? Moreover, who says that America is a product of the white, male, Eurocentric tradition outlined above? What about native American influences? What about Africa?

And so on. A swamp yawns open before us, ready to devour everything. The best response to all this—and finally the only serious and effective response—is not to enter these murky waters in the first place. As Nietzsche observed, we do not refute a disease. We resist it. And yet there are two issues that must be engaged. The first concerns the often-heard charge of "elitism." The traditional notion of a liberal-arts education is unquestionably elitist in the sense that it focuses on the pinnacle of human cultural and intellectual achievement. It must also be admitted that not everyone is either interested in or capable of taking advantage of a liberal-arts education conceived in this way. In a deeper sense, however, the impulse behind a traditional liberal-arts education is radically democratic. For its riches are in principle available to anyone with talent and energy, regardless of class, gender, skin color, ethnic origin, etc. The real tyranny is to deprive students of the best that has been thought and said in the name of one or another version of political rectitude.

The second issue that must be engaged concerns the last item in Professor Searle's inventory, the fundamental question of "universal human interest." To speak of universal human interest is to acknowledge faith in a community of human endeavor that transcends the contingencies of race, gender, ethnic heritage, and the like. As the multiculturalists realize, some such faith is central to the tradition of liberal education; this is one reason they are so eager to repudiate that tradition. Many commentators have pointed out that the demography of the United States is changing so rapidly that the non-white populations in this country may outnumber the white by the end of the next century. Already in certain areas more than half the population is non-white. Shouldn't the liberal-arts curriculum acknowledge this change by questioning the priority still granted to Western culture and by including more literature by blacks, Hispanics, Asians, etc.? The multiculturalists think so.

Demographics notwithstanding, the truth is that by virtue of its history, its political institutions, its major cultural affiliations, and its dominant language the United States is essentially a Western society. And short of a major cataclysm, it will remain so. As Donald Kagan, dean of Yale College, observed in an address that is one of the most hopeful signs from the academy in recent years, the United States does enjoy a common culture,

> itself various, changing, rich with contributions of Americans who come or whose ancestors came from every continent in the world, yet recognizably and unmistakably American. At this moment in history an objective observer would have to say that it derives chiefly from the experience of Western Civilization, and especially from England, whose languages and institutions are the most copious springs from which American culture draws its life. I say this without embarrasssment, as an immigrant from a tiny country on the fringe of the West, without any connection to the Anglo-Saxon founders of the United States.[12]

Because the roots of our society are so deeply embedded in Western culture, being ignorant of that culture means being ignorant of oneself. Consequently, as Dean Kagan argues, "It is both right and necessary to place Western Civilization and the culture to which it has given rise at the center of our studies, and we fail to do so at the peril of our students, our country, and of the hopes for

12 Donald Kagan, "E Pluribus Unum," an address delivered to the freshman class at Yale College in September 1990. The address is reprinted in *Commentary*, vol. 91, no. 1 (January 1991), pages 47-49.

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a democratic, liberal society emerging throughout the world today."

The emergent democracy to which Dean Kagan refers with justified pride is essentially a Western phenomenon. But next to the triumphs of hope and liberty we have seen in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and elsewhere, we must place the many foreboding signs of resurgent nationalism, ethnic separatism, and ancient racial hatreds that have also been a prominent feature of recent history. It wasn't long ago that we were assured that the "end of history" was nigh: that a Western-style liberalism was on the verge of establishing itself the world over and that peace and amity were breaking out everywhere. But instead of that attractive version of the end of history, we are now witnessing what some have called the retribalization of the world: a violent turn against Western liberalism and its tradition of rationality, respect for individual rights, and recognition of a common good that transcends the accidents of ethnic and racial identity. Given this situation, it is all the more imperative that we educate our students in the Western tradition, that we teach them about the virtues of our society and its democratic institutions. Such education is the staunchest bulwark against the forces of disintegration we are facing.

The multiculturalists rant on about the repressive, inequitable nature of U.S. society. It is instructive to note, however, that people all over the world continue to flock here. They do so not because they believe the United States is perfect, but because they believe that the Western democratic institutions that govern this society will allow them greater freedom, economic opportunity, and personal dignity than they are likely to find anywhere else in the world. The multiculturalists notwithstanding, the choice facing us today is not between a "repressive" Western culture and a multicultural paradise, but between culture and barbarism. Civilization is not a gift, it is an achievement—a fragile achievement that needs constantly to be shored up and defended from besiegers inside and out. These are facts that do not easily penetrate the cozy and coddled purlieus of the academy. But they are part of the permanent challenge that any civilization must face. This was something that Evelyn Waugh understood with exceptional clarity. "Barbarism," he wrote in a somber moment in 1938,

> is never finally defeated; given propitious circumstances, men and women who seem quite orderly will commit every conceivable atrocity. The danger does not come merely from habitual hooligans; we are all potential recruits for anarchy. Unremitting effort is needed to keep men living together at peace; there is only a margin of energy left over for experiment however beneficent. Once the prisons of the mind have been opened, the orgy is on. There is no more agreeable position than that of dissident from a stable society. Theirs are all the solid advantages of other people's creation and preservation, and all the fun of detecting hypocrisies and inconsistencies. There are times when dissidents are not only enviable but valuable. The work of preserving society is sometimes onerous, sometimes almost effortless. The more elaborate the society, the more vulnerable it is to attack, and the more complete its collapse in case of defeat. At a time like the present it is notably precarious. If it falls we shall see not merely the dissolution of a few joint-stock corporations, but of the spiritual and material achievements of our history.[13]

Tenured Radicals is about the privileged beneficiaries of the spiritual and material achievements of our history who, out of perversity, ignorance, or malice, have chosen to turn their backs on the culture that nourished them and made them what they are. It is about intellectuals who have defiled reason with sophistries, and teachers who have defrauded their students of knowledge. Because of the times we live in and the hard choices we face as a society, it is, above all, a cautionary tale.

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13 Quoted from *The Essays, Articles and Reviews of Eveyln Waugh*, edited by Donat Gallagher (Boston: Little Brown, 1984), pages 161-162.

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Walter Goldwater: a memoir

by Samuel Lipman

I met the bookseller and onetime radical Walter Goldwater in the fall of 1965 through the good offices of the pianist Jacob Lateiner and his then-wife Vera. When the Lateiners heard from me that I was interested in politics, that I liked to read such intellectual magazines as *Partisan Review* and *Dissent*, and that I had once played a lot of tennis, they fairly cackled with pleasure at the prospect of bringing Walter and me together. They told me that he had been a Trotskyite, owned a New York bookstore specializing in radical literature, and loved playing tennis rather more than life itself.

This discussion with the Lateiners had taken place during the preceding summer, and when I got back to New York I paid my first call on Walter at his University Place Bookshop. Located in a large store on the side of the ineffably seedy Albert Hotel, the shop was of a piece with its brother Broadway and Fourth Avenue bookstores one and two blocks over. Shelves crammed with usually tattered books and going all the way to the (very high) ceilings, several enormous tables piled with even more tattered and in any case vastly uninteresting books, everywhere was disorder, dust, and, much worse, the faint smell of cat urine. This smell, by the way, seemed to mark every secondhand bookstore south of Fourteenth Street, with the exception, of course, of the Strand, *sui generis* in its lack of smell as it was in every other way too.

After I introduced myself to Walter, a man in his mid fifties who was dressed (or so I remember) in what turned out to be his usual attire of shiny blue suit, white shirt, messy tie, and black shoes with white cotton socks, I asked him whether he had any old *Partisan Reviews*. He didn't have any, and he explained to me that his store wasn't really concerned with political *literature*, but with *political* literature. What that in practice came down to was two subjects, Communists and Negroes. I should add that I have chosen the above formulation advisedly: Walter never seemed to me very much interested in either Communism or Negritude as ideologies. He was, however, fascinated—in the case of Communism obsessed—with those who made their personalities and their lives out of these ideas.

Within these two areas Walter instantly seemed a master of all he surveyed. I need not—but I will anyway—tell the reader that the fall of 1965 was a fateful moment in both the world of international and domestic affairs and in the evolution of the political movements with whose personalities Walter was so concerned. The Soviet Union and China still seemed what later would be called an item. Lyndon Johnson was increasing our involvement in Vietnam and consolidating his Great Society legislative gains at home. The unregretted John Lindsay was running for mayor of New York, and his election was within the short space of two months to bring us a long and intractable transit strike that set the pattern for union militancy and city-government weakness that is with us yet.

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The University of California at Berkeley had only gone a few months past the 1964 beginnings of the Free Speech movement, and the Civil Rights movement was on its way to passing the political torch to the anti-Vietnam War movement.

I must be frank to say that I never understood Walter's interest in the Negroes. To say this is not to say that I did not understand, or that I failed to share, his conviction that they had been abominably treated as a people. I always felt that his specializing as a bookseller in the Negro movement was a curious offshoot of his radical, left-wing past. For it was with the Communists, of every stripe and every hue, of every fame and every misery, that his bookselling and his human hearts lay.

But I was only to find out all this in the future. On my first visit to his store, I did make an appointment to play tennis with him. One afternoon shortly thereafter, I met Walter and his wife, Eleanor, in front of their apartment—they lived in a rickety flat on Fourth Avenue over her store (the Corner Book Shop, specializing in old cookbooks)—and together we drove in their beat-up car to some outdoor by-the-hour rental tennis courts in Queens. He and I played singles while Eleanor watched; he was an ungainly but incredibly dogged player, who chased down every ball and played each point to the end.

Despite my post-California rustiness—I had left my natal world of the perpetual tennis match some six years earlier—I was, and probably always had been, the better player, and moreover I was some twenty-five years younger. We did on this occasion talk a bit about politics, and I first heard the absolute depths of Walter's anti-Stalinism, and his utter contempt for the Stalinists and their fellow-travelers who had made up the core of the New York intellectual and publishing world from the 1930s through the 1950s.

As the months passed, we played tennis, both outdoors and indoors, many times, and I began to learn more, not about Walter's tennis playing (which, like tennis in general, didn't interest me greatly) but about his political *Bildung*. The story he told me came out in bits and pieces, and I no longer remember just when I heard any particular fact or incident. I feel a bit shamefaced in writing about Walter's life, not simply because I may remember inaccurately some of what he told me, or because what he told me was in any way embarrassing, but because I have absolutely no independent factual confirmation for any of it. I hope that the reader will take me, at least provisionally, on trust, and because of me also take Walter on trust. Here, then, is Walter's story.

He was, he told me, the son of a well-known and prosperous physician in New York City. He had grown up in the late Teens and early Twenties in Harlem, then still something of a middle-class Jewish neighborhood. I assume that he had gone through the New York City public schools—there never was less of a private-school, preppy type than Walter—and then, I think he said, he had gone away to the University of Michigan, where he studied French. Upon graduation in the mid 1920s he came back to New York, and sat for the written examination for a position teaching French in the public-school system. He came in second, but such was the competition, and such was the paucity of places, that he didn't get a job. So he went looking into the business world.

He had only one request to make of a prospective employer: because he had seriously studied the piano and loved music, he asked that any person who might hire him agree to allow him Friday afternoons off, that he might attend the weekly New York Philharmonic concert. One employer agreed, and that agreement, that quirk of fate, set the seal on what was to become Walter's life. For the employer was Alexander Trachtenberg, the presiding genius of International Publishers, the American publishing arm, not just of the American Communist Party, but of the entire world Communist movement then presided over by Josef Stalin and then, as always, based in Moscow. Surely Walter Goldwater was one of the few people in the history of radicalism who could say that he

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had become a Communist because of his desire to attend Friday concerts of the New York Philharmonic.

Walter worked for a while for Trachtenberg, and soon became a devout sympathizer of the Soviet Union; whether Walter ever actually joined the Communist Party, I do not know. But too much is certainly made of what used to be called "card-carrying" membership; there are surely more things in Communist affiliation than are admitted by people who quibble over little stubs of pasteboard. In any case, by the end of the 1920s Walter, now (I think) married for the first time, had decided to move to the Soviet Union. Greater political love, I suppose, hath no man than is expressed by willingly changing countries, but Walter went.

While still in America, Walter had put himself to learning Russian, and once in the Soviet Union, he worked as a translator at a foreign-languages publishing house, then busy fulfilling its Stalinist mission of flooding the world with the true Red gospel. Walter was by nature gregarious, and soon he had made some friends. Communist that he was, he could not help noticing that, as later shown by the assassination of Kirov in 1934, the Soviet political atmosphere was becoming heavy with doom. During Walter's Soviet period, one of his friends disappeared for several months. When he reappeared, he had lost all his teeth; his only answer to Walter's questioning was that he had been to the dentist.

There must have been a thousand other reasons for Walter's change of heart, but he decided at this point to move back to America. Inexplicably, he remained a Communist sympathizer, and even decided that he would like to work in some clandestine fashion for the Soviet Union. Walter told me about this by way of a response to a chance comment I made about Whittaker Chambers's book *Witness*, which I then admired hugely, as I do today. Walter told me quite calmly that it was Chambers, then still attached to the party in some underground connection, who had recruited him for espionage.

The arrangement he had made with Chambers was that they—just who the "they" were was clear to me only by implication—would set him up in business in a bookstore near Columbia; Walter's only task was to run a respectable business that could be used as a front for agents to meet each other and leave mail. But something went wrong. When Walter was taken by Chambers to Communist Party headquarters by Union Square for a final vetting, he was refused employment, on the grounds that because he knew the Russian language, he was fundamentally untrustworthy.

I asked Walter whether he did not blame Chambers for trying to drag him into something that might have cost him his life, or at least his liberty. Walter's answer was quick, and surprising: "I count," he said, "the hours I spent with Chambers as the best hours I have ever spent in my life."[1] But something did snap in Walter after this almost-experience with the Soviet spy *apparat*, and he now became politically disenchanted. Gradually he moved to that halfway house between Stalinism and democracy known as Trotskyism. By the beginning of the 1940s Walter had become a Trotskyite in good standing, and he told me with great pride that he was allowed to guide Trotsky's grandson around the New York World's Fair; I no longer remember, if indeed I ever knew, whether the World's Fair Walter spoke of was its first year in 1939, or its second in 1940.

I don't know what Walter did in World War II, but I do recall his telling me that near the end of the war he was in the circle around Dwight Macdonald and his *politics* magazine. I doubt if Walter had a high opinion of Macdonald as a person, but he did admire his political audacity. Walter certainly treasured

1 Perhaps at this point I should add that Walter seemed crestfallen that when Chambers came into Walter's store sometime during the mid or late 1950s, Walter recognized Chambers, but Chambers did not recognize Walter. When Walter tried to talk to him about what had gone on between them, Chambers remembered nothing, and the exchange between them ended frigidly.

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having been where the intellectual action was: early in our friendship, he pointed out to me the passage in Mary McCarthy's novella *The Oasis*, a 1949 story about a utopian community started by soon-to-be-former New York Trotskyites at the end of the war, in which she (or so it seemed to me) rather meanly lampooned Walter:

> Henry, a tall, thin young man with an ovoid head who resembled a nail-file . . . this radical young printer . . . was not accustomed to dealing with persons of a certain eminence. He . . . withdrew to a corner of the room, rebuffing a whisky and soda. "Thanks, my wife and I don't drink," he declared.

I suppose I must have talked with Walter about when and why he ceased being a Trotskyite. But I have no memory of such a conversation, and indeed I never remember having a serious discussion with Walter about ideas. I don't really even know whether Walter was a Marxist. He must have read all the classics of the genre, but the only writings I can now hear him talking about were Stalin's, and even here the issue wasn't ideas but what might be called the influence of personalities: Walter was particularly anxious to find where Stalin had said or written the infamous words often attributed to him: "Writers are the engineers of human souls."

I mentioned earlier that 1965 was, among other of its distinctions, the moment at which our Vietnam commitment was steadily increasing. Walter and I talked a good deal about Vietnam and the direction of our policy there. It could never be said that Walter had any illusions left about anything backed by the Soviet Union or what used to be called—the term now seems quaint —international Communism. But Walter was basically a pessimist about the future world and the future of freedom. Like so many former Communists and their sympathizers, Walter had a morbid fear of the Soviet Union; that fear very much included Communist China and the surrogates of the Soviet Union and China.

It was as if as a young man Walter had identified the future, and the future was Red; only in the 1930s he approved of that future, and then, taught by force and brutality, he grew to hate that which he had once backed. In other words, he never gave up his belief in the inevitable victory of a Soviet-led Communism. It can hardly be said that Walter had any illusions about socialism, or its covert descendant liberalism; but I cannot forget Walter's telling me that for some years he remained a minor financial contributor to Irving Howe's piously socialist *Dissent*.

And so Walter opposed our involvement in Vietnam. I still possess documentation of his position, contained in a memo he wrote for friends toward the end of 1965 and then had reproduced for others. The result is one thousand agonized words. Here Walter understands that North Vietnam is not a holy cause. But once he admits this fact, he goes on to come out against the killing of Americans and South Vietnamese; then he admits that Communism is an evil, but follows this immediately by stating that World War III, and especially nuclear war, is to be avoided at all costs. He cannot base his Vietnam position on who is on the good side, because the bad and the good are on both sides. He realized that any incremental escalation we might make would be matched by the North Vietnamese, and that the costs in human life would be immense.

Then Walter steeled himself to ask the big question: what if the "majority of the people" in Vietnam and elsewhere in Asia —and I have no doubt that by "majority of the people" Walter meant what the Communists used to call the masses—what if they want Communism? We would then be reduced, and it is clear Walter thought we were so reduced, to resisting Communism in our own, morally equivocal, self-interest.

At this point Walter's memorandum ceases any pretense at argument, and simply states, "The question is *get out*, or *get out if possible*." Whatever Walter's thoughts about the direction of history, he hardly thought that the Vietnamese Communists would make it easy for us to get out; he knew they

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would make no concessions. After another mention of avoiding World War III, Walter finally stated his unambiguous position: get out now, immediately, regardless of the cost.

At this point Walter and I ceased to talk about contemporary politics. Instead we fell back on the past, as he presented me with nuggets from his inexhaustible store of information about who was who in the American radical movement, with a particular concentration on the Stalinists of the 1930s and the 1940s. It was these Stalinists—the playwright, screenwriter, and memoirist Lillian Hellman occupied pride of place in Walter's bestiary—whom he called "the bad guys." Walter fervently believed in the guilt of Alger Hiss, the Rosenbergs, and Owen Lattimore, along with all the old China hands in the State Department; Walter's experience with Chambers had not been wasted.

Here Walter was in his element, and he was able to back up his stories with printed material from congressional and other governmental anti-Communist investigations. I remember his selling me the fourteen volumes (plus report and index) of the 1951-52 Senate Judiciary Committee hearings on the very left-leaning Institute of Pacific Relations, and pointing out with a wry laugh the duplicitous behavior of the fellow-traveling witnesses. I remember too his getting me a very expensive copy—several years before it was reprinted—of the Atomic Energy Commission hearings on the security clearance of physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer. I doubt very much whether Walter thought that Oppenheimer had been a Soviet agent, but he did think him something worse, at least in Walter's mind: a political fool. Indeed, it was one vestigial sign of Walter's earlier philo-Sovietism that he thought not being smart about politics was the worst indictment that could be brought against a supposedly serious person.

One day, I suppose somewhere about 1970, Walter told me had some letters he thought I should see. They turned out to be written by Earl Browder, the head of the American Communist Party from the early 1930s to 1945. A word about Browder, now a forgotten figure, is in order here. In his day he not only ruled the party with an iron hand, but was a public spokesman for Stalinist policy with contacts going up as high as President Roosevelt's wife. His many books, all as dry intellectually as he was personally, were required reading for Communists and fellow-travelers; there was even a personality cult gotten up about this arrogantly modest man. Browder reached the pinnacle of his career just after the Teheran Conference (the first meeting of Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin) at the end of 1943, when he became the Kremlin's anointed messenger of peaceful co-existence. But in the spring of 1945, the signal for Browder's ejection came in an open letter from the French Communist Jacques Duclos to the American party, accusing Browder of selling out through dissolving the Communist party and replacing it by the Communist Political Association. The American party immediately felt itself to a man (and a woman, I might add) in the presence of orders from Moscow; in an unprecedented campaign of vilification (unprecedented, at least, in this country) he was ruined. Browder took his ejection hard, and tried to defend himself against his erstwhile party acolytes, but of course he failed; American Communist Party proceedings were, after all, arranged to conform to their Soviet models. Curiously, though the American party severed its relations with Browder, the Soviet Union did not: for several years thereafter, he remained on the Soviet payroll in some obscure commercial capacity.

The Browder letters Walter showed me (and which he allowed me to copy) were dated in the first months of 1952, a year before Stalin's death. They had been written to A. A. Heller, a well-off and long-time Communist supporter; Browder's letters made quite clear that Heller, though willing to maintain cordial relations with Browder, still supported the old Stalinist line on the inevitability of irreconcilable conflict between socialism and capitalism. In contrast, Browder still believed in his Teheran line that some pacific outcome between the two super-

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powers was possible and consistent not just with Marxism but with the logic of Stalin's own postwar policies for the European Communist parties.

What was so interesting about Browder's attempt in these letters to prove himself a better Stalinist than Stalin himself was not the turgid and iterative Marxist analysis, complete with citations, that went on, as always with Browder, for thousands upon thousands of words. More important, these letters contain overwhelming evidence of Browder's fealty to Stalin, a fealty unmarked by all the abuse Browder took from 1945 on. Because copyright law makes it impossible for me to quote from these letters directly,[2] what follows now is a paraphrase of these extraordinary revelations:

> You cite Stalin's discovery that there could be socialism in a single country, and the way this emergency in Communist thought was mastered by fortitude and belief. You are right, and I am happy you brought up this marvelous case, in which I was a contented pupil of Stalin at all times, and never in doubt. . . . I have now again studied Stalin's speeches at the Seventh Plenum of the Comintern Executive in late 1926. These speeches are unquestionably an example of the greatest achievements of thinking of which we have record. [Letter of February 2, 1952]

Evidently at some earlier point in their correspondence, Heller had accused Browder of making an egregious blunder in dissolving the American Communist Party. Browder's response demonstrated conclusively that the American party was a tool of Stalin and the Soviet Union. Thus Browder wrote Heller (again in my paraphrase):

> I question [whether it was a blunder] . . . What we did in America [in dissolving the party] was agreed to in Moscow when it happened . . . The French Party endorsed our action . . . George Dimitrov [the head of the Comintern before its putative dissolution in 1943] expressed his agreement to me in person by telegram before the action . . . If on reconsideration such people thought differently, it would have been easy for them to let me know, and certainly they were aware that we would then have reversed our "error." [Letter of February 19, 1952]

Taken together, these passages more than made Walter's case. I didn't need any persuasion about the moral and political guilt of those whom Walter so despised, but at the same time there could be little doubt that his passion against the Stalinists had about it something of the personal wreckage one might expect after a particularly messy divorce case. I wouldn't have thought Walter a particularly passionate person, though gossip had it that somewhat earlier he had been a legendary ladies' man; but he did have a curious doggedness about him, indeed what I can only call a Protestant doggedness that formerly was called by its proper name (which Walter would never have used) of righteousness. Walter was indeed a secular moralist, whose god was reason.

Though Walter made a lot of laughing noises, I never thought of him as humorous, though he certainly was sardonic. He repeated a story about himself to the effect that people, echoing the old anti-anti-Communist witch-hunting charge, always accused him of finding Communists under the bed. In his case, he said it was true: he stored his old copies of the official party monthly *The Communist* in exactly that place. It must be said that there was a great deal of truth behind this labored witticism: Walter was a great authority in the field of radical periodicals, having done a beautifully produced and indispensable "bibliography with brief notes" of these ephemeral publications for the Yale University Library in 1964.

Walter, of course, was Jewish. He was an atheist, and must somewhere have thought that his being Jewish had happened to him,

2 I do not know the copyright status of these letters. At the end of one of the letters, Browder writes that he has edited some of them, and had them privately printed so that they might be available to several hundred friends.

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as it were, by accident. Still, I always felt —and felt is the word, rather than thought —that he had a soft spot for Israel. Certainly in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war he was uncompromisingly on Israel's side. They were the "good guys"; just why they were so for Walter I never knew—I assume he at least rationalized his loyalty on the grounds that Israel was a democratic society.

On one occasion at least I remember Walter coming to hear me play the piano. It wasn't at a concert, but rather in our apartment, I believe in the early winter of 1967-68. I was trying out a recital program I was to play in public in New York a few weeks later. The program consisted of only two works, the Sonata of Liszt and the "*Hammerklavier*" Sonata of Beethoven. Mostly what Walter had to say after I had finished was pure *pro forma* compliments. But I do remember his saying that it was a pleasure hearing me play because I wasn't "flustered"; his major knowledge of musical performers, he said, was of the respected harpsichordist Sylvia Marlowe (whom I had been told he had once had an affair with and had subsequently supported in her career), and she was always "flustered" when she played for people.

As time passed, I settled into a routine of going down to Walter's once every week. He usually asked me to come up to his apartment after my store visit, and sometimes I accepted. There we ate warmed canned soup and a lunch-meat sandwich in the kitchen. This always struck me as odd fare, coming as it did from a renowned cookbook specialist. I always understand the Goldwater ambiance as bohemian; indeed, the only non-bohemian appurtenance in their life appeared to be a well-protected Steinway grand piano which, sadly enough, I never heard Walter play.

Over the years, Walter and I played a lot of tennis together. It was on one of our early tennis ventures that I remember Walter in the locker room after we had played staring quizzically at his bare legs, which were covered with what appeared to me to be hives. I asked him what they were, and he answered, "Oh, that's my disease." What disease? I asked. He answered without a moment's hesitation, "leukemia." Throughout all my knowledge of Walter, he suffered from leukemia, and I once visited him in a hospital, where he was receiving cobalt-radiation therapy. But I never heard him complain at his fate, and I must say that I came to admire him greatly for his fortitude. It was because of our admiration for him in this regard that my wife and I gave our son (born 1969) the name Walter as one of his two middle names. Walter died after all his years with leukemia in the mid 1980s, some years after his wife.

I once had a rather less pleasant experience of Walter than any I have told about thus far. It goes without saying that Walter was running a business, and that everything in his store was for sale. One of his main business activities, in addition to Negro literature and, I should add, a goodly number of what he referred to as "incunables," were the very federal government anti-Communist publications he so recommended to me. He had an enormous quantity of these Government Printing Office pamphlets, including many duplicates, in a basement storeroom in the Albert Hotel, and one day he made me a proposition: if I would organize these pamphlets, he would give me in compensation for my work the *third* most complete set of the material.

At this remove, it is difficult for me to describe the squalor and the fetid air—what I would describe as cat urine plus—of Walter's basement storeroom. It is enough to say that many of the pamphlets I organized had on them toothmarks, which I assumed at the time were made by rats. After many days' work, I ended up with what Walter must have known all along would happen: one voluminous set of pamphlets, a second not-quite-so-voluminous set, and a very scrappy third set. My guerdon fit very nicely into a normal shopping bag, and when I made my unhappiness about the outcome known to Walter, he told me that was the way life was.

I stopped seeing Walter after 1980. Our relation had already undergone a diminution after I started writing for *Commentary* in the

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mid 1970s; I had become busier, now that I had stopped my attempts to make a career playing the piano. My busy-ness increased after the founding of *The New Criterion* in 1981-82, and I always felt that my public involvement with the Reagan administration struck Walter as something less than praiseworthy. He did call me at the *New Criterion* office sometime in 1983, and complimented me effusively on my colleague Hilton Kramer's position against Lillian Hellman. I don't think I ever heard from Walter again, and when I read of his death in *The New York Times* some two years later I was upset that he and I had so little contact toward the end of his life. My only further thought was that I wondered whether, at the very end, rationalist that he was, he had minded dying.

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Donald Barthelme and "la vie quotidienne"

by Bruce Bawer

What would *The New Yorker* have done without Donald Barthelme? And what would Donald Barthelme have done without *The New Yorker*?

These are far from idle questions, for rarely in our time have the careers of a celebrated fiction writer and a leading magazine represented so productive an example of what biologists call mutualism, with each partner serving a significant need of the other. Though it might seem incomprehensible to young readers who know him only for his slight valedictory novel, *The King* (which he completed shortly before his death in 1989), the introduction of Barthelme's barbed, idiosyncratic *jeux d'esprit* into the pages of *The New Yorker* a generation ago did the same thing for the magazine's fiction department that the introduction of guitar music into the liturgy did for the Roman Catholic Church at about the same time: namely, it helped a widely venerated institution with a reputation for stuffiness to look, in the eyes of the modish young urbanites whose patronage it sought to retain, as if it were keeping abreast of the age. To be sure, *The New Yorker* continued to publish well-made conventional fictions by the likes of John Cheever (who deplored Barthelme's work and complained that the newcomer was "taking his space" in the magazine) and Barthelme's contemporary John Updike, but readers perceived a change of direction, and it was a direction they identified with Barthelme.

Meanwhile, set in that dignified-looking *New Yorker* type, and surrounded by all that fastidious *New Yorker* prose and those solemn advertisements for Bonwit Teller and Brooks Brothers, Barthelme's clever little stories looked considerably more wild and innovative—*dangerous*, even—than they actually were. The very fact that they appeared in *The New Yorker*, moreover, and not in some less prominent and less Establishment-oriented publication, encouraged readers to see them as representing a significant literary development. Certainly it seems astonishing, in retrospect, how large a reputation Barthelme acquired, and how quickly. Place him alongside other so-called metafictionists who rose to prominence in the Sixties, such as John Barth, William Gaddis, and Robert Coover, and Barthelme looks not only lucid but tame and unthreatening, his language games elementary, his jabs at middle-class American life no more serious than a stand-up comic's. Place him alongside other popular black humorists of the day, such as Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut, and Barthelme seems—well—*domesticated*, a writer who, in his own odd way, often reads like a traditional Cheever-style *New Yorker* writer after all, what with his downbeat, underplotted stories of shattered or shattering professional-class New York marriages, and who, even when he makes use of exotic characters or settings, manages to relate them in some way to the everyday experience of the typical *New Yorker* subscriber—and

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often, indeed, to make a joke out of their remoteness, with that *New Yorker*ish provincialism that sees the entire history of Western civilization as a dress rehearsal for Manhattan and all the world as an outer borough.

Barthelme is more likely than Heller or Vonnegut to bring up, say, Saint Augustine or Kierkegaard, but whereas Heller and Vonnegut may be said to be serious about being frivolous, Barthelme is frivolous about being serious; which is to say that while he tends to form his *dramatis personae* out of more authentic stuff than Heller or Vonnegut, he treats them with less respect. I have compared him to a stand-up comic; but it is perhaps more accurate to say that his work is to literary fiction what performance art is to serious drama. The narrative arts give us people we can believe in and care about; Barthelme gives us always and only Barthelme. It is interesting that while few (if any) critics have credited him with inventing memorable characters, many have praised him for his distinctive, dead-on-target "voices." Yet we rarely fall prey to the illusion that there are human beings behind these voices: we are always aware of Barthelme gagging it up, putting on a show.

It is these voices that do most of the work of establishing setting and character (to the extent that one can speak, in Barthelme's fiction, of setting and character), of advancing the plot (to the extent that there *is* plot), of expressing ideas and conveying a vision. The voices are deployed in a variety of ways: to read through Barthelme's work is to find instances of fiction in the form of catechism, of monologue, of Socratic dialogue. Yet, as if to confirm the views of those who had always regarded his formal experimentation less as the serious manifestation of inner artistic imperatives than as a function of his desire to be seen as a body surfer on the Aquarian Age's *nouvelle vague*, Barthelme's stories grew more and more conventional in form as the Seventies and Eighties wore on. Witness his novels: the first, *Snow White* (1967), consists of brief segments, averaging about two hundred and fifty words each, some of which advance the bizarre narrative in relatively orthodox ways and some of which come out of left field in both form and content; here and there, between the chapters, are pages containing nothing but a single brief sentence apiece, or a fragment, or some other arrangement of words, always in large upper-case letters, its relevance sometimes clear, sometimes enigmatic (e.g., " WHAT SNOW WHITE REMEMBERS: / THE HUNTSMAN / THE FOREST / THE STEAMING KNIFE"). To read *Snow White* is to be reminded one moment of Woody Allen, the next of Gertrude Stein. His second novel, *The Dead Father* (1975), is composed mostly in staccato dialogue (no quotation marks), with telegraphic bits of description provided where necessary; there is also a more expansive book-within-a-book by one of the novel's characters. The most audacious formal device in Barthelme's largely conventional third novel, *Paradise* (1986), is an intermittent series of *ex post facto* question-and-answer sessions between the protagonist and (presumably) his psychiatrist; as for *The King* (1990), its only formal curiosity is the brevity and talkiness of its chapters.

What Barthelme's novels and stories all share is a self-conscious quirkiness of incident and expression, a colloquial tone (and an implication that more formal language, which he often slips into for parodic purposes, tends under most circumstances to denote not intellectual sophistication or complexity but phoniness), and a seldom relieved irony that sometimes appears to be pointed in every possible direction. (Reading Barthelme, one always knows that something is being mocked, though one is not always sure what.) One of Barthelme's stories is entitled "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne," and all his fiction is indeed, in a sense, a critique of everyday life—and, especially, of everyday life in the high-tech secular culture of contemporary urban America. In *Snow White* he devotes more than a page to a detailed description of a portion of the eponymous heroine's housework, the intention of which is apparently to make housework look ridiculous and homemakers robotic. (What's more, he emphasizes the dumb-animal

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aspects of such work throughout the novel by consistently using the word *horsewife* in place of *housewife*.) In the story "Robert Kennedy Saved from Drowning" (which appeared, incidentally, before Kennedy's assassination), Barthelme implies that though we all share the same longings, and though our lives are all sad and ordinary in much the same way, we mortal millions live *alone*: "He hears something playing on someone else's radio. . . . The music is wretchedly sad; now he can barely hear it, now it fades into the wall. . . . He turns on his own radio. There it is, on his own radio, the same music. The sound fills the room."

What cure is there for this essential loneliness? Not fame. (An exchange from *Paradise*: "What's it feel like to be famous?" "Feels very much like not being famous.") Not getting out of the house. ("'Take me home,' Snow White said. 'Take me home instantly. If there is anything worse than being home, it is being out.'") Not "consciousness-expanding" drugs. (From *Snow White*: "Clem thrust his arm into the bag of consciousness-expanding drugs. His consciousness expanded.") Sleep, yes, but only for one night at a time. (From *Paradise*: "Q: Where is satisfaction? A: In sleep?") And love, perhaps, but not for long. Witness the story "Edward and Pia," which consists almost entirely of simple declarative sentences that describe the daily routine—and increasingly evident mutual disaffection—of a middle-aged American husband and his Swedish mistress who, after a sojourn in London, settle down on her farm. One observes in such a story some of the more lamentable hallmarks of Brat Pack minimalism of the Eighties—the studied flatness, the emphasis on superficial particulars—but these traits serve a valid purpose in "Edward and Pia," whose aim is to show how even the most intensely charged relationship, in the most promising of circumstances, gets ground down by nothing more or less than the dailiness of life. What's more, the story profits from a very un-Brat Packish waggery: "Edward worried about his drinking. Would there be enough gin? Enough ice?" Here and elsewhere, Barthelme does a genuinely witty job of pointing out how much of life consists of banal activities; he is never sharper, funnier, or more sincere than when he is capturing the state of mind of a hapless gent—a gent, it must be said, very much of Barthelme's own demographic description—who can't see any joy or love or light or certitude or peace or help for pain except in a bottle of booze.

That marriage appears in "Edward and Pia" only as an institution betrayed is far from unique in Barthelme's fiction; time and again he implies that to be married is, by definition, to be miserable, to be hurtful, and, yes, to betray. The story "The Rise of Capitalism" contains this *mot*: "'It is better to marry than to burn,' St. Paul says, but St. Paul is largely discredited now, for the toughness of his views does not accord with the experience of advanced industrial societies." In "The Dolt," a husband, irked by his wife's ability to answer the questions on a sample test with which he's been struggling, matter-of-factly contemplates bringing up her sordid past in order to regain the upper hand: "she had been a hooker for a period before their marriage and he could resort to this area if her triumph grew too great." And the narrator of the darkly funny "Critique de la Vie Quotidienne," slipping briefly into the second person, remarks that "[t]he world in the evening seems fraught with the absence of promise, if you are a married man." On a typical evening, "you decide to break your iron-clad rule, that rule of rules, and have eleven drinks instead of the modest nine with which you have been wont to stave off the song of twilight, when the lights are low, and the flickering shadows, etc., etc." (These lyrics from "Just a Song at Twilight" also appear, to much the same ironic purpose, in *The Dead Father*.) Having used up all the ice, "you measure up your iceless over-the-limit drinks, using a little cold water as a make-do, and return to what is called the 'living' room, and prepare to live, for a while longer, in a truce with your circumstances." All of Barthelme's fiction is, one might say, about how

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one makes a truce with one's circumstances. This is not to suggest that in his stories it is always, or even often, an easy truce. "Holy hell," says the narrator of "Critique" when his infant child climbs into the marriage bed and wets it. "Is there to be no end to this *family life*?"

Don't dare to see symbolism in that child wetting the marital bed, because Barthelme repeatedly ridicules the idea of analysis —analysis of *any* variety, whether it be the kind that is entailed in psychiatric therapy or the kind engaged in by literary symbol-hunters. The first of *Snow White*'s three parts concludes with a tongue-in-cheek list of questions for the reader, among them: "Do you like the story so far?" "Does Snow White resemble the Snow White you remember?" "Have you understood, in reading to this point, that Paul is the prince-figure?" and "Has the work, for you, a metaphysical dimension?" Not only is Barthelme here lampooning the sorts of questions that follow stories in school textbooks; he is also lampooning the very idea of critical interpretation, judgment, and ranking: "Holding in mind all works of fiction since the war, in all languages, how would you rate the present work, on a scale of one to ten, so far?" When he concludes the list of questions, furthermore, by asking whether human beings should have additional shoulders ("Two sets of shoulders? Three?"), he seems to be implying that a work of fiction, however idiosyncratically constituted, possesses an organic authenticity, and that holding opinions about how a given book is put together is thus as foolish and pointless and just plain *wrong* as holding opinions about how human beings are put together. Among the stories in which he mocks the critical enterprise are "The Party" (whose narrator wonders: "Is it really important to know that this movie is fine, and that one terrible, and to talk intelligently about the difference?") and "The Glass Mountain," whose narrator scales a glass mountain for a prize that is unnamed in the opening pages, only to be disappointed at the summit: "I approached the symbol, with its layers of meaning, but when I touched it, it changed into only a beautiful princess."

Generally more diverting, and less pretentious, are Barthelme's glosses on psychoanalysis. "The Sandman" takes the form of a very funny letter from a man to his girlfriend's shrink. "I fully understand," the man writes,

> that Susan's wish to terminate with you and buy a piano instead has disturbed you. You have every right to be disturbed and to say that she is not electing the proper course, that what she says conceals something else, that she is evading reality, etc., etc. Go ahead. But there is one possibility here that you might be, just might be, missing. Which is that she means it . . . The one thing you cannot consider, by the nature of your training and of the discipline itself, is that she really might want to terminate the analysis and buy a piano. That the piano might be more necessary and valuable to her than the analysis.

The message is clear: since psychiatrists are as confused, troubled, and self-absorbed as anyone else, and since there is no "happily ever after" for any of us, why not channel one's exasperation with the world into art instead of endeavoring vainly to eliminate it through psychoanalysis? "What do you do," the man writes, "with a patient who finds the world unsatisfactory? The world *is* unsatisfactory; only a fool would deny it."

Psychoanalysis, then, is absurd because it seeks to achieve an impossible deliverance from life's inevitable malaise; by the same token, literary analysis is absurd because it presupposes the idea of greatness—a concept that Barthelme, an early if unsystematic canon-basher, frequently belittles. That he agrees with the character who observes that "what an artist does, is fail" would appear to follow from his sardonic reference, in one story, to "seven high-class literary works of the first water and four of the second water and two of the third water," from his ironically solemn account, in another story, of the death of a "great waiter" (if there can

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be great writers, why not great waiters?), and from his inclusion, in *Snow White*, of a handful of *idées reçues* about the great Russian writers: "IT WAS NOT UNTIL THE 19TH CENTURY THAT RUSSIA PRODUCED A LITERATURE WORTHY OF BECOMING PART OF THE WORLD'S CULTURAL HERITAGE. PUSHKIN DISPLAYED VERBAL FACILITY. GOGOL WAS A REFORMER. AS A STYLIST DOSTOEVSKY HAD MANY SHORTCOMINGS. TOLSTOY. . . ." Probably because his work represents, in many ways, the antithesis of Barthelme's zany, featherweight fictions—and, of course, because *War and Peace* is widely thought of as the *ne plus ultra* of conventional novels—Tolstoy comes in for special attention from Barthelme. "At the Tolstoy Museum," a slight, unfunny jab at the idea of literary greatness, includes not only text but drawings of the imaginary museum's exhibits—among them, one of Tolstoy's coat, which, surrounded by the great man's admirers, looks to be about thirty feet high. Similarly, "The Genius" offers glimpses of the everyday life of an unnamed genius (and drunk)—a life which proves to be just as inconsequential, as full of self-doubt, and as void of meaningful accomplishment as anyone else's. ("I always say to myself, 'What is the most important thing I can be thinking about at this minute?' But then I don't think about it.")

If Barthelme derides the language of ambition in *Snow White*, wherein one of his characters complains that another plays cards "when he could be out realizing his potential" and "maximizing his possibilities," it is because nobody, however maximized his possibilities, can ever hope to ameliorate the essential misery of the human condition. And if Barthelme puts a gigantic coat in the Tolstoy museum—and, in an affected story entitled "The Balloon," imagines a monstrous balloon whose random motion, constant shape-changing, "apparent purposelessness," and lack of limitation and definition "offered the possibility . . . of mislocation of the self, in contradistinction to the grid of precise, regular pathways under our feet"—it is because both these outsized objects represent man's longing for a godlike and transcendent Other, for some form of deliverance from *la vie quotidienne*, for (as Barthelme sees it) a father. The father image is, in fact, focal in Barthelme, virtually all of whose fiction appears to be informed by the notion that the defining circumstance of a man's life in the modern world (Barthelme doesn't concern himself overmuch with women's lives) is his boyhood sense of his father as all-knowing and all-powerful, his eventual discovery of his father's essential helplessness and mortality, and his lifelong craving for, and inability to find, a substitute for that original illusion of perfect love and authority. Which, Barthelme would have it, explains the cult of great authors, the cult of psychiatry, the power of kings and presidents, and the anomie, acedia, and anhedonia that (to his mind) typify adult life in a secular society.

The key word here is *secular*, and perhaps what makes it most difficult to dismiss Barthelme as a mere entertainer is that, unlike many serious contemporary authors, he has manifestly devoted a good deal of thought to the question of God. Just when one has decided to write him off as a nihilist, Barthelme hints at the possibility of a deity and of a moral purpose to human life. "Perhaps we should be doing something else entirely, with our lives," says one of the seven men who live and work together at menial jobs in *Snow White*. "God knows what. We do what we do without thinking. One tends the vats and washes the buildings and carries the money to the vault and never stops for a moment to consider that the whole process may be despicable. Someone standing somewhere despising us." Indeed, if at times Barthelme's work seems quite thoroughly nihilistic, at times it almost reads like a devout Christian's critique of secular life in the Computer Age. The story "Paraguay" tenders a dystopic vision of artworks being reduced to software products; in "Report," a man puts a moral sense on IBM cards. In a story called "The Leap," a character says that "[p]urity of heart is . . . to will several things, and not know which is the better, truer thing, and to worry about this, forever." No writer who

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has such sentences in his fiction can be described as utterly lacking in seriousness, however compelling the evidence may appear to be.

At the very least, it seems safe to say that whenever Barthelme writes about fathers he is also writing about God, and vice versa. Time and again, he links the demythification and eventual demise of the temporal father with the widespread twentieth-century loss of belief in a heavenly Father. And just as he mocks the mystique of earthly father-surrogates—psychiatrists, literary luminaries—so in several stories he takes on saints and angels. "The Temptation of Saint Anthony," for instance, recounts the saint's life in a contemporary American city, where he lives in an apartment and eats too much fried food. The saint, we are told, "was underrated quite a bit . . . mostly by people who didn't like things that were ineffable. I think that's quite understandable—that kind of thing can be extremely irritating to some people." What Barthelme is scoffing at here is not saints as such, but the idea that the glorious things they represent can have anything to do with the less-than-glorious world we live in. The fundamental problem, to his mind, is not that transcendence is a philosophically invalid concept; on the contrary, this and similar Barthelme stories evince a palpable longing for something beyond quotidian reality that imbues them with a degree of humanity, and even of pathos, that is absent in much of his work. Rather, the problem is that transcendence is irreconcilable with the pettiness and prurience of the human animal: "There is a sort of hatred going around for people who have lifted their sights above the common run. Probably it has always been this way." For Barthelme, the bottom line is that neither man nor his world is perfectible: there's no omniscient king or father, no happily-ever-after paradise; short of a cure-all for life's bruises, the best one can hope for (metaphorically speaking) is Band-Aids—which, not coincidentally, occur frequently in Barthelme's fiction.

Barthelme puts colloquial language to fine ironic use in "The Temptation of Saint Anthony," the demotic narration contrasting pointedly with the notion of sanctity. But for all their humanity, it is also in such stories as this that Barthelme's principal failing tends to stand out most glaringly: namely, that drawn as he is to the idea of transcendence—whether romantic, intellectual, or spiritual—he is unable or unwilling to transcend for long his own chronic jokiness, his position of safety, as it were, behind his battery of cynical gags, to take the risk of representing a compellingly imagined human soul in the grip of romantic or intellectual or spiritual passion, and, by showing the disappointment of that passion, to afford us a richer sense of the tragicomedy of man's failure to surmount his circumstances. One's complaint, let it be clear, is not that Barthelme opts for surreal humor rather than for Tolstoyan gravity; it is, rather, that his humor is thin, cautious, formulaic. One has the feeling that he's afraid of probing too deeply, especially in matters of religion (a subject that is notorious for making *New Yorker* editors uncomfortable). He refuses to mourn—not for long, anyway: even if something isn't funny, it must be put over as if it were. Thus if in one sentence he brings up Thomism or Teilhard de Chardin, chances are that in the next sentence, like a talk-show host worried that the conversation might be getting too heavy for his entertainment-starved audience, he'll segue into yet another goofily relevant Tin Pan Alley lyric ("You smile. And the angels sing") or start cracking wise.

If in "The Temptation of Saint Anthony" Barthelme juxtaposes the saintly ideal of self-sacrifice with the reality of human meanness and the daily grind, in *Snow White* he sets the familiar fairy tale's romantic ideals against those same realities, re-creating the eponymous maiden as the housekeeper and lover of seven men in what might seem, on the face of it, an enticing alternative to the traditional family. (Or, as Barthelme puts it, "a mocksome travesty of approved behavior.") But Snow White doesn't appreciate what she's got, for she's too busy thinking that "someday [her] prince will come"—a sentiment of

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which the narrator, spoofing psychobabble, has the following to say: "By this Snow White means that she lives her own being as incomplete, pending the arrival of one who will 'complete' her. That is, she lives her own being as 'not-with' (even though she is in some sense 'with' the seven men, Bill, Kevin, Clem, Hubert, Henry, Edward, and Dan). But the 'not-with' is experienced as stronger, more real, at this particular instant in time, than the 'being-with.' The incompleteness is an ache capable of subduing all other data presented by consciousness." What bothers one, in this passage, is Barthelme's insistence on having his cake and eating it too: he wants to analyze Snow White, yet doesn't want to commit himself to his own analysis—and thus distances himself from it by means of a mock-academic persona. As for *Snow White* itself, to read it a quarter century after its first appearance in *The New Yorker* is to realize that it is very much a book of its time, and that it owed much of its original appeal to the relative freshness of a type of humor that has long since come to seem familiar, even passé, to readers who grew up on "Saturday Night Live" and David Letterman.

Barthelme's second novel, *The Dead Father*, is an intense, fantastic, often dream-like story (reminiscent of *As I Lay Dying*) about a band of men and women, among them a young man named Thomas, who are dragging to its burial place the gigantic body of someone who, though still half-alive, is referred to as the Dead Father. (He is, we are told, "*Dead, but still with us, still with us, but dead.*") He begins the journey as a powerful, godlike figure—complete with "facilities for confession"—who "controls what Thomas is thinking, what Thomas has always thought, what Thomas will ever think, with exceptions"; in the early pages he slays a host of musicians (whose names—in one of Barthelme's many lists—occupy more than a page). Over the course of the novel, however, the Dead Father declines steadily, and is deprived by Thomas, in turn, of his belt buckle, passport, and keys. The novel is, among other things, an allegory about the gradual decline of fathers from indomitability to impotence, and about the deeply paradoxical role of the son as acolyte, nemesis, and mourner. Incorporated in the book is *A Manual for Sons*, an outré assortment of general observations about fathers and sons ("Fathers have voices, and each voice has a *terribilità* of its own"), as well as some vividly rendered fathers' voices: "Hey son. Hey boy. Let's you and me go out and throw the ball around. Throw the ball around. You don't want to throw the ball around? How come you don't want to go out and throw the ball around? I know why you don't want to go out and throw the ball around. It's 'cause you—Let's don't discuss it. It don't bear thinkin' about." Of all Barthelme's novels, indeed, *The Dead Father* is the strongest, even though it bespeaks as much as any of them a rather adolescent and male-centered sensibility that recalls John Irving and Robert Bly.

Paradise, Barthelme's third novel, is also his most realistic in terms of character and *mise en scène*. Simon, a fifty-three-year-old divorced architect who has failed to find meaning or happiness in either work or love, has three young, beautiful, and sexually acquiescent women move into his New York apartment. Sounds like paradise—but it doesn't last. Why not? "Your vital interests are not involved here," one of the women gripes. "You don't give a shit." It's true. Simon, we learn, "is amazed by what he doesn't care about. He's bought nothing but a couple of new shirts and a few books. He's thought of no new projects." Of course, like the title of Barthelme's collection *Great Days*, the novel's title is ironic: in such a world as this, we're meant to see, it's impossible even to *imagine* paradise. At one point the narrator thinks of the phrase "hog heaven" and tries to visualize what heaven would be like for hogs. But he can't:

> In hog heaven the hogs wait in line for more heaven. No, not right, no waiting in line, it's unheavenly, unhogly. The celestial sky is quilted in kale, beloved of hogs. A male hog walks up to a female hog, says "Want to get something going?" She is repulsed by his language, says

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> "Bro, unless you can phrase that better, you're chilly forever." No, that's not right, this is hog heaven, they fall into each other's trotters, nothing can be done wrong here, nothing wrong can be done. . . .

No less difficult to imagine than heaven is a caring God. As Simon tells his shrink: "You think about this staggering concept, the mind of God, and then you think He's sitting around worrying about this guy and this woman at the Beech-nut Travelodge? I think not." Diverting though it is, alas, *Paradise* has a loose, offhand quality that reminds one of the later novels of Joseph Heller.

What *Snow White* is to the fairy tale, *The King* is to Arthurian legend. Barthelme's last novel is set in England during the early days of World War II; the conceit is that King Arthur and his court are still in charge, listening to Ezra Pound and Lord Haw Haw on the radio, chatting about "Winston" (who thinks he's running things), and discussing the possibility that the Holy Grail is actually a yet-to-be-discovered weapon capable of unprecedented devastation. A knight talks about his book, *On the Impossibility of Paradise*; Arthur, who is journeying to his grave as surely as the Dead Father, contemplates building "a great wall around everything we hold dear, and defend[ing] that wall, to the death of course, with everything we hold dear inside it, and everything we do not hold dear outside it—." *The King* is sometimes amusing; but both Mark Twain and Monty Python have tackled this material before, and more wittily. The novel is, in fact, by far Barthelme's most unsatisfying: flimsy, tired, tedious, its plot uninspired, its characters paper-thin.

But then Barthelme was always weakest in long forms. He wrote better stories than he did novels, and better sentences than he did stories. His strength—and his real interest—was patently not in large-scale matters (character development, plot manipulation) but in the details, the fine points of style and diction. Throughout his work, he proffers bizarre coinages (*disbosom*, *hurlment*, *mortalaciousness*) that would seem to follow logically from words we use, his goal presumably being to bring to the surface the absurdity and arbitrariness of language—and, by extension, of life; likewise, his many grammatical inversions ("nothing can be done wrong here, nothing wrong can be done") invite us to consider how words work together. His reference to "literary works . . . of the second water" is one of many extrapolations from common idioms—some witty, some belabored—that are intended to call into question the assumptions underlying those idioms; and when a character declares, in *Snow White*, that "I had hoped to make a powerful statement, coupled with a moving plea. . . . I had hoped to make a significant contribution. . . . I had hoped to bring about a heightened awareness," Barthelme's goal is to make us look behind the clichés by means of which we express our ideals about life and about the expressive powers of language. He plays with double meanings, too, savoring a Swedish woman's confusion of the English words *rape* and *rapture* and finding it nicely ironic that the lewd-sounding term "interrupted screw" actually refers to something—"a screw with a discontinuous helix, as in a cannon breach"—that has less to do with sex than with war.

To read a book like *Snow White* or *The King* is to get the impression that for Barthelme the mere act of bringing these familiar characters into the modern world and writing about them in colloquial language was a moral act; it is as if he saw his clear, forthright prose as a sort of sieve through which only a true sense of things could pass. Just as he plays games with history (in various fictions Balzac goes to a movie, Luther telephones Haydn, and two jousting knights are interrupted by a Girl Guide selling cookies), so he also juxtaposes his own down-to-earth, contemporary voice with parodically motivated voices of a more formal or archaic character, and writes, in those voices, about subjects for which they would generally be considered inappropriate. He also mimics to amusing effect the solemnity of nineteenth-century prose, incorporating in "The Dolt" a Tol-

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stoyan narrative by the protagonist, as if to underscore the greater authenticity of Barthelme's own more homely rendering of reality. Even funnier than this story (and equally self-serving) is "The Question Party," whose opening pages are cribbed verbatim, according to Barthelme's footnote, from a story that was first published in 1850 in *Godey's Lady's Book*; as the tale progresses (and as Barthelme begins to introduce his own material), it shifts away from the artificial world of Victorian popular fiction toward the darker, more equivocal—and, to Barthelme's mind, infinitely more realistic—world of Barthelme's own fiction, in which pretenses fall away, the unspeakable is spoken, the unnatural acknowledged.

One of the more arresting sentences in Barthelme happens to be a borrowing from Kierkegaard: "What is wanted . . . is not a victory over the world but a reconciliation with the world." To a large extent, Barthelme's fiction—by turns comical and colorless, astute and asinine, fresh and deadeningly familiar—is about how hard-won that reconciliation often proves to be, and (in his view, anyway) how ungenerous the terms. For all the inherent drama of this theme, however, Barthelme's work is rarely compelling, and ultimately hollow; Barthelme never comes close to creating people whose difficulties with the world one passionately believes in and cares about. (Which is not, of course, to suggest that he tries to.) The more one reads of Barthelme, furthermore, the greater one's exasperation with what one increasingly comes to perceive as forced, facile displays of indifference and pessimism. Barthelme concludes *Snow White* as follows: "THE FAILURE OF SNOW WHITE'S ARSE / REVIRGINATION OF SNOW WHITE / APOTHEOSIS OF SNOW WHITE / SNOW WHITE RISES INTO THE SKY / THE HEROES DEPART IN SEARCH OF A NEW PRINCIPLE / HEIGH-HO." Ho-hum. In similar fashion, instead of resolving the conflict established in "Views of My Father Weeping" (a weirdly gripping, quasi-Kafkaesque yarn about a young man whose father has been run over by an aristocrat's carriage), Barthelme ends the story abruptly, at the moment of greatest suspense, with the word "Etc."—as if to say that he will have no more of the conventional plot he has concocted, or (perhaps) to chide us too-conventional readers for having been foolishly drawn in by it. One can almost see him shrugging: "Who cares what happens? What does it matter?" Some might consider this a clever gambit, but it strikes this reader as yet another demonstration of a thoroughgoing timidity, a refusal on Barthelme's part to become truly involved, to dive below the surface of human emotion and see how close he can come to touching bottom. Where Barthelme differs, in the end, from a writer like Vonnegut is that while one can quite easily believe that the author of *Cat's Cradle* is every bit as simple in heart and mind as his work suggests, the occasional glimmers, in Barthelme's outwardly glib and nihilistic fictions, of a heartfelt engagement with Important Questions suggest that there were in him depths that—for whatever reason—he never dared to explore in his writing. What, one finds oneself wondering more and more, *would* he have done without *The New Yorker*?

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Is your translation really necessary?

by D. S. Carne-Ross

"The English and Greek languages remained where they were," T. S. Eliot wrote of a performance of Gilbert Murray's "eighteen-penny" translation of the *Medea*. He went on to explain: "Few persons realize that the Greek language and the Latin language, and, *therefore*, we say, the English language, are within our lifetime passing through a critical period." Since the Classics are no longer a pillar of the cultural establishment, he continued, "if they are to survive, to justify themselves as literature, as an element in the European mind, as the foundation of the literature we hope to create, they are very badly in need of persons capable of expounding them." And, by implication, of translating them.

These words were written in 1918, hardly the happiest time in human history, yet the cautiously sanguine note they strike now seems almost to come from a golden age. For the situation today is far graver than the one Eliot envisaged. If some shreds and tatters of Latin linger on, Greek, as the normal possession of a cultivated person, has pretty well vanished. The labor of six centuries gone for next to nothing, some modern Petrarch, it may be, is contemplating in tears a copy of Homer that he cannot read. And yet "the" Classics, as we continue to call them, despite protests from the anti-Eurocentric front, are still with us. Read in translation, they are part of the "background" thought to improve the minds of students, something that the better sort of critic is expected to know enough about to allow him to drop a judicious reference to Horace or Greek tragedy now and then. Although few may now possess the classical languages, translations of the major classical authors are on the shelves of every decent paperback store.

But before we reassure ourselves that all is not lost, we should ask how long classical translation will survive when *no one* knows either Greek or Latin. What happens with the death of the last person who has had first-hand experience of the actual words of Virgil and Sophocles? There may be something to learn from what we are told of the decline of Greek culture in the Islamic world. It began with the situation we face today, when the translations on which that culture relied "could no longer be checked against the original texts and, in a way, became fossilized. . . . The revitalizing force of immediate contact with the sources was absent in Islam."[1]

If the parallel holds, it seems likely, then, that although our society may have decided that from now on the Classics mean the Classics in translation, we will not be able to keep them even in that form unless there are still a few people—by no means necessarily all professional scholars—who still enjoy "immediate contact with the sources." This means that there must be schools providing the possibility of learning Latin, if scarcely Greek, and that colleges and universities keep their classical departments going. Given the in-

1 The quotation is from Franz Rosenthal's *Das Fortleben der Antike im Islam* (1965).

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creasing demand for more scientific training, which for the most part means simply vocational training, the prospects are not good, but we must try to be hopeful and speak up when the occasion requires.

The night of cultural amnesia has, however, not yet quite set in. Knowledge of Greek and Latin is still to be found, translations, presumably made from the originals, continue to appear regularly, sometimes even good ones. Homer, most translated of all authors, is at this moment making yet another curtain call. Sponsored by Robert Fagles, he steps forward with a new *Iliad*,[2] and Allen Mandelbaum has just provided him, and ourselves, with one more *Odyssey*.[3]

It says something about the two Homeric poems that they can sustain repeated translation. Or does it? In the commercial field, one more hairwash comes on the market not because it possesses virtues lacking in its predecessors but because someone believes that it will sell. Does the same principle operate here? Perhaps it is not so much the inexhaustible richness of Homeric poetry, the hope of catching some beauty previously missed or obscured, that brings so many new *Iliad*s and *Odyssey*s to market, but rather the lure of classroom adoption. Classical translation can be big business. It is poetry, however, that ought to concern us here. Travelers in wartime England were asked, "Is your journey really necessary?" The same question should be put to translators of Homer.

Robert Fagles's *Iliad* first. The Homeric hero was instructed always to be first and to surpass the others. The immediate contenders here being Richmond Lattimore and Robert Fitzgerald, Fagles's Homeric task, let us say, was to be lighter on his feet than Lattimore and avoid language that may be close to the Greek but is often far from any known form of English; and to give us a poetry as good as Fitzgerald's can be while taking rather fewer liberties with the literal sense of the original.

Fagles is now a veteran in the field of Greek translation. Beginning thirty years ago with the odes of Bacchylides, arguably the best thing he has done, he moved ambitiously up to the masters and gave us a much applauded *Oresteia*, vigorous to be sure, even if the vigor sometimes looks suspiciously like vulgar bounce, then a more sober rendering of the three Theban plays of Sophocles that has served its turn in the classroom.

Facing the challenge of the *Iliad*, Fagles has had to call on all the energies that animated his *Oresteia*, and he sometimes does so to strong rhetorical effect. He gets off to a spanking clip with the great slanging match between Achilles and Agamemnon in Book 1, and he is good at tough talk: "Come—/ the proof of battle is action, proof of words, debate. / No time for speeches now, it's time to fight." He can set a scene before our eyes and make us see it, as Homer can. Watch Achilles's Myrmidons preparing to move into action:

> Hearing the king's command the ranks pulled closer,
> tight as a mason packs a good stone wall,
> blocks on granite blocks for a storied house
> that fights the ripping winds—crammed so close
> the crested helmets, the war-shields bulging, jutting,
> buckler-to-buckler, helm-to-helm, man-to-man massed tight
> and the horsehair crests on glittering helmet horns brushed
> as they tossed their heads, the battalions bulked so dense.

Fagles does well again with the battle similes where human *berserksgangr* finds its fitting analogue in a great beast's lust to kill:

> And Hector lunged again
> like a murderous lion mad for kills, charging cattle
> grazing across the flats of a broad marshy pasture,

2 The *Iliad* of Homer, translated by Robert Fagles, with an introduction and notes by Bernard Knox; Viking, 683 pages, $35.

3 The *Odyssey* of Homer, translated by Allen Mandelbaum; University of California Press, 526 pages, $35.

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> flocks by the hundred led by an unskilled
> herdsman
> helpless to keep the marauder off a longhorn
> heifer
> no fighting that bloody slaughter—all he can do
> is keep pace with the lead or straggling heads,
> leaving the center free for the big cat's pounce
> and it eats a heifer raw as the rest stampede away.

Here Fagles scores against both Lattimore and Fitzgerald who perform decently but show less relish for what they are called on to do.

On occasion he seems to feel that Homer pulls his punches and needs a helping hand. When Athene comes to Achilles on her peace-keeping mission in Book 1, Homer says that she stood behind him and gripped his hair. Fagles has the goddess "rearing" behind him (like a horse?) and seizing his hair. She does not need to exert so much force, even less so does Apollo, ordering Patroclus to give way, need to "shriek" at him. He calls out in a dreadful voice. At moments of excitement, Fagles too often gives us not so much energy as noisy violence. His Achilles, disposing of the body of the suppliant Lycaon whom he has just killed, "*grabbed* a foot, *slung* him into the river . . . as he *yelled* over him." My emphases, but Fagles provides too many of his own, and gives us far too much of this sort of thing: "Rampaging so, / the gasping Trojan warteams hurtled on." Pardonable perhaps, even if this is no more than sports-commentator journalese, less pardonable when he writes of Achilles, fallen to the dust in agony of grief for the death of Patroclus, "overpowered in all his power, he sprawled in the dust." To prefer William Arrowsmith's rendering of this line, "And he fell as great men fall, in all his pride and greatness," is not to impose on Homer neo-classical notions of epic dignity. Arrowsmith has heard the tragic accent of Homer's line as Fagles apparently has not.

On first opening this new *Iliad* and leafing selectively through it, one may well be impressed by its vigor, as the chorus of enthusiastic worthies on the back dust cover, perhaps not having had time to read very deeply, evidently were. Before long, though, one reflects that vigor is one thing, strength quite another. Lattimore was hardly a strong writer, and yet his language sometimes has more real strength than Fagles's. There was a poet somewhere deep down in that gnarled versifier. He describes a shield, for instance, as "hooped in circles of glaring bronze" ("ringed with gleaming bronze," Fagles). Battling with Achilles, the river Scamander, in Lattimore's account, "rose on him / in a darkening edge of water." Fagles can only offer "looming into a murderous breaker, dark, over him."

Arnold reproached Homer's English admirers for the "boistering, rollicking way" they like to speak of his poetry, and reminded them that Homer "has not only the English vigour, he has the Greek grace." Grace is not something we should ask Fagles for, nor can Lattimore provide it. Fitzgerald can; he was a graceful writer and this gift served him well with the small change of translation that is so important for the translator of a long poem. Even when nothing notable is happening, his language must keep us happy, as Homer's does. Here is Zeus putting Hera in her place: "Abruptly / and with oblique intent to ruffle Hera, / Zeus in cutting tones remarked." The nice edge of irony that Fitzgerald does so well. Fagles: "But abruptly Zeus was set on infuriating Hera, / courting her fire with cunning, mocking taunts." The words jostle one another unmannerly. Fitzgerald, something of a patrician himself, can catch the right social tone, the grand level at which Homer's princes normally speak to each other. When an Achaean chieftain addresses the supreme commander, he should begin: "Lord Marshal of the army, Agamemnon." The stately military speech of an earlier or imagined day. Always using the same line, as Homer does, Fitzgerald gets it right. Fagles tries the line several ways and always gets it wrong: "Great marshal Atrides, lord of men Agamemnon," "Generous marshal Atrides, lord of men Agamemnon." Someone from the ranks has obviously stepped out of place; the tone is uneasy, slightly servile. Fagles is, in contrast to Fitzgerald, a proletarian, and as

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such has perhaps given us an *Iliad* best suited to the egalitarian temper of our time.

With the intimate or tender forms of address he is usually no more successful. In the great exchange between Hector and Andromache in Book 6—a wife begging her soldier husband not to risk his life so desperately, a passage that achieves the fullest accuracy literature can aspire to, "the harvesting of complete truth," as George Steiner once put it—Hector tells her, in Fitzgerald's version: "Unquiet soul, do not be too distressed / by thoughts of me." The words are as gentle as Homer's. Poor Fagles can only offer: "Andromache, / dear one, why so desperate? Why so much grief for me?" He rampages his way effectively enough through the big action scenes, but he does not have a delicate ear for the English language, and one often has to wonder about his ear for Homer's Greek. In Book 18, Achilles, not yet ready to return to the fighting since his armor was captured when Patroclus was killed, goes out to the trench guarding the Greek ships and simply shouts, a shout so devastating that it sends the Trojans reeling back in panic. Homer makes us hear this shout by placing one of Achilles's patronymics, here given in the genitive, at the end of two successive lines: *Aíakidáo, Aíakidáo.* Fitzgerald does nothing with the repetition. Homeric *terribilità* was not in his range. Fagles writes: "And Trojans hearing Achilles' shrill, brazen voice." Apart from the fact that the line has no rhythm, no movement, no shape, his ability to hear anything "shrill" in this dreadful sound makes one throw up one's hands in despair. Lattimore, perhaps aiming at no special effect but as usual doggedly replacing Greek words with English words, alone brings off something comparable: "so then high and clear went up the voice of Aiakides. / But the Trojans, when they heard the brazen voice of Aiakides . . ."

Finally there is Homer the poet, the poet of whom Fitzgerald, at a time when the authorities were telling us to cultivate a practiced indifference to most of Homeric diction, wrote: "we find the verse of Homer . . . in itself as beautiful as the verse of Yeats or Shakespeare." How does Homer the poet fare in this new translation? Once again, comparison must make the point. Here, in Fitzgerald's version, is the tragic figure of Priam near the end of the poem, most of his fifty sons dead, the greatest and dearest of them, Hector, lying unburied in Achilles's quarters: "The old man, / fiercely wrapped and hooded in his mantle, / sat like a figure graven." Fagles: "and the old man amidst them, / buried, beaten down in the cloak that wrapped his body . . ." Oh well, not positively bad. Of Fagles we must say: At his best he is a competent translator. Of Fitzgerald: He is a writer, and a poet. Is this new *Iliad* necessary? No, not really, I am afraid (though the long introduction by Bernard Knox is worth having), but probably it will make a lot of money.

There is a case for new *Iliad*s. We do not have a translation that satisfies the taste of our age as fully as Pope's *Iliad* satisfied the taste of his. The case for a new *Odyssey* is far harder to make. Fitzgerald's version, endlessly resourceful, enchantingly written, is in secure possession of the field, and it is hard to think of anyone who could surpass it. There might, however, be room for a translation, decently if not superbly written, that did not read between the lines as adventurously as Fitzgerald's sometimes does. When the person with no Greek comes on the description of Athene, transformed into a young girl, as "the awesome one in pig-tails," he may be moved to compliment Homer on a nice stroke of wit. The compliment is deserved but should go to Fitzgerald, not to Homer who simply calls her "the dread goddess with beautiful hair."

"Faults" of this kind Allen Mandelbaum is demonstrably not guilty of. His are of a very different order. Consider, from Book 1 of his new translation of the *Odyssey*, this passage:

> Athena, gray-eyed goddess, answered him:
> "Do not delay me now, I truly wish
> to leave; whatever gift your heart would give—
> you'll choose a handsome one, I'm sure—can be
> consigned when I stop here again, on my

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> return, that I may bear it home. And it
> will earn for you a gift of equal merit."

Writing of this sort is a sign of the times that should be taken seriously. Here is a verse-translator, published by a distinguished university press, the author of versions of the *Aeneid* and the *Divine Comedy* lavishly praised by literary academics, who does not possess the minimal competence in the art—the ancient, honorable *art*—of verse composition. Translation of epic poetry demands a range of skills not often possessed by those who have tried their hand at it over the years. Cowper's late-eighteenth-century *Iliad* and *Odyssey* plod along in leaden sub-Miltonics, Lord Derby's mid-nineteenth-century *Iliad*, though inoffensive, is a work few would turn to for pleasure. Yet both men knew how to put an iambic pentameter together and build a verse paragraph. Mandelbaum does not, but nobody seems to mind or even notice. To point to this as one more symptom of cultural breakdown, at a time when much graver symptoms are all about us, may seem unbalanced. Does the art of verse making matter that much? Civilized ages have believed so.

Donald Davie may be right in thinking that this particular breakdown is associated with the writing of free verse and its unquestioned acceptance as a valid mode of composition. He did not, surely, have in mind the ambitious *vers libre* of the modernists, but rather the anything-goes verse of more recent decades that should not be called free, since "free" acknowledges the existence of another kind of writing that is subject to formal constraints, and should certainly not be called verse.

Mandelbaum was unwise to employ the iambic pentameter, a traditional line that sets certain standards he is not qualified to meet and apparently does not even recognize. He would have done better to use the free six-beat line supposedly established by Lattimore as our equivalent of the hexameter, and adopted by Fagles. Since this is not a native English meter and has small claim to be considered a meter at all, it evades formal criticism. One can only say of a line of Fagles's that it has a certain rhythm and shape ("and the words came piling on like a driving winter blizzard"), that another is simply bad prose ("pray god such anger never seizes me, such rage you nurse"), and notice that when he wants a line that really is verse, he silently falls back on our old ten-syllabled friend ("tight as a mason packs a good stone wall," "and death's dark cloud closed down around his corpse").

Metrically, then, Fagles can do whatever he wants. Mandelbaum, helplessly at grips with a meter which his betters have practiced for centuries, cannot. For the most part he is content to be relentlessly iambic. Four or five *tum*s per line are required of him plus the requisite number of *ti*s. Here he is at it, from the first paragraph of the poem:

> He saw the cities—mapped the minds—
> of many;
> and on the sea, his spirit suffered every
> adversity—to keep his life intact, [*sic*]
> to bring his comrades back. In that last task,
> his will was firm and fast, and yet he failed.

Finding himself a *tum* short now and then, he has obtrusively to insert one—the "do" of this line, for example: "They never do give birth and never die." (Possibly this is an example of what he has called phonic packing.) Occasionally, this he does know, the numbing sequence of iambs must be varied, by a hypermetric syllable, for instance: "Still hidden by the mist Athena had sent." Fair enough, a hop, skip, and a jump never hurt anyone.

Intermittent rhyme provides Mandelbaum with another kind of variety. Rhyme can have its proper place in an unrhymed poem so long as it is used to significant effect, as Milton uses it when, placing the rhyming words at the ends of two successive lines, he makes Satan confess that his purpose in Eden is to "destroy / joy." The function of Mandelbaum's rhymes is less easy to discover, nor are they of a kind to give much pleasure: "they made my father vanish: they devised / oblivion for him—much deeper than / oblivion known by any other man."

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Then there is the business of getting from one line to the next. A poet will sometimes do so by enjambing, as Homer himself does. In the art of enjambment Mandelbaum has few inferiors. He writes in one place: "When that was said, he set the cup of honey-" We pause for a moment to consider this beverage, only to realize that we must press on and, jump-starting the next line, learn that what is being set is a "cup of honey-/ sweet wine."

But enough of these technical matters, for although the skillful making of verse is the ground on which everything else must rest, the reader of Homer looks for other satisfactions, satisfactions that the translator of Homer can hope to provide even if his writing is rather clumsy. The *Odyssey* is full of vivid encounters, this is one of its delights, human beings interacting with each other in a great variety of situations. In Book 6, for example, Odysseus, thrown up on one more unknown shore after three days keeping afloat on the open sea, naked, salt-stained, hungry, catches sight of the sprightly young princess, Nausicaa, and her maids. They have just finished doing the family wash and are having a high old time. He badly needs help, but he must go about asking for it delicately. The speech that Homer gives him is consummately adroit and we can believe that he wins her help and soon gains a place in her heart. Fitzgerald does hardly less well. Feigning amazement at her beauty, his Odysseus begins: "Mistress: please: are you divine, or mortal?" Mandelbaum's Odysseus begins: "O Queen, I do implore: Are you divine / or mortal?" Later on in the poem, back in Ithaca, we find Penelope complaining to her old nurse about the suitors' vile behavior. She says, in the Greek, "Nurse, they're all wicked." Fitzgerald is touchingly simple: "Oh Nan, they are a bad lot." Almost anything will do here, anything that sounds like credible speech, anything except Mandelbaum's "Nurse, all of them are men of malice."

What, finally, to end with the question I put to Fagles's *Iliad*, what of the poetry, and the joy, of this poem? For although the *Odyssey* has in its soul the iron that every major work must have, it is, often, a greatly joyful poem. Fitzgerald sometimes lets the joy sweep over him, so that he sings his way into a new book, just as Hardy sings his way into the pastoral episode at Talbothays Dairy in *Tess*:

> South into Lakedaimon
> into the land where greens are wide for dancing
> Athena went—

went, to remind Telemachus that he has still much business to attend to. Mandelbaum is too stern a taskmaster to allow us these delights: "Athena left for Sparta's spacious plains / to prod Odysseus' son." (Just prod that boy, will you? I think he's fallen asleep.) It is hard to imagine that anyone is ever going to enjoy reading this new *Odyssey*.

But this is a dreary business, pointing to faults in a work where there are no virtues to praise. A worthless translation of the *Odyssey*—let it go, does it matter so much? Yes, it does. It matters, now that our sum of things is under squalid attack from the libertarian mongers of the various isms, driven by the lust to destroy everything we have made and done over the last two or three thousand years. It matters that, among other things, we provide ourselves with valid translations of the foundational masterpieces of our tradition, since so few people can now get at them in the original languages. Where such translations already exist, it is utterly wasteful to keep bringing out inferior versions. We need a shelf-full of readable translations of the major Greek and Roman classics. "*Hendref* for world-winter," David Jones cried at the end of his most beautiful poem, using a Welsh word meaning winter-quarters and also ancestral dwelling, to shelter and preserve us through the bleakly diminished years that lie ahead.

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Titian's daily practice

by Creighton Gilbert

A recent exhibition of drawings by David Smith consisted entirely of female nudes. A reviewer for *The New York Times*, after rightly noting that this theme is not generally associated with Smith, went on to explain that the nude is nevertheless a major focus of Western art, and so is likely to appear in any artist's work. So, too, the man in the street, when he happens to think about artists and imagine himself being one, is not wrong to dream at once that he is drawing naked women. Besides the basic element of sensual pleasure, a factor of envious respect for the skilled craftsman who is so privileged is involved.

Yet in the history of Western painting, the female nude was not usual until Titian (1487-1576) made it so. Earlier it was a rare and special case, eccentric in an artist's production. Today Botticelli is best known for the *Birth of Venus*; but it is almost unique among his productions and in his time was not the most famous. It was not Titian's way, to be sure, to be assertive about novel subjects, and he did not abruptly invent this one. It is more plausible to think of his great forerunner Giorgione as the trailblazer. Titian then developed many variations and references, and the importance of the nude to his art, if not its newness at the time, is always recognized. One of his nudes is on the cover of the catalogue of the current Titian exhibition in Washington,[1] and another was on the cover of the recent book about him by Charles Hope, a contributor to the Washington catalogue, as others have been on still earlier books. Besides aiming to catch buyers, these are legitimately illustrative of the contents, and in the Washington case the painting is also one of the National Gallery of Art's own finest Titians.

This painting, *Venus with a Mirror*, also presents intimately the issue of nudity in the specific sense of absence of clothing, as we learn from the catalogue entry. In general the catalogue is very good on technical reports, and in this instance informs us that the painting's chief figure was clothed in an earlier draft, in a transparent underdress, lately revealed by X-rays. Still more remarkably, there was even a previous painting on this canvas, on which Titian had begun a completely different subject. A man's velvet coat from that work was saved, and is still visible on the surface, where it is a wrap around Venus's hips. The catalogue reports this without comment, as a conservation specialist's fact, but it should not be left simply implying that Titian was deft about economizing. He was no doubt too happy with the passage to destroy

1 "Titian, Prince of Painters" is on view at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (October 28, 1990-January 27, 1991), after opening at the Palazzo Ducale in Venice, Italy (June 2-October 7, 1990). The catalogue, prepared, like the exhibition, by Francesco Valcanover and some one dozen specialists, is published by Marsilio Editori, Venice, and is available from the National Gallery of Art (432 pages, $59.95; $24.95 paper).

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it, and in the final version accentuated it through the side-by-side rendering of the flesh.

Titian criticism does not have a particularly sophisticated tradition. Most early writers simply praised the alive effect of everything, and this, even though it was a cliché of the period for any artist, is probably more to the point than the modern substitution of praise for his color. This, again, is a common response to many artists of our mainstream tradition. To praise the color of Rothko, or, more relevantly, of Matisse—Titian's most notable heir as a painter of female nudes in our context—should instantly suggest how different Titian's way with color is, and how inadequate the formula is for him. Titian's constantly active surfaces involve the color areas with a rare range of textures. This begins, plainly, with paint texture, for he is also the pioneer in our tradition of "painterly painting." It is well understood that in his career we can steadily see the autonomous brush stroke becoming more and more self-assured. This is the model for the execution of painting that his successors have particularly followed and in the process paid conscious homage to Titian. But if we turn to the brushy textures of French masters from Delacroix and Manet to Vuillard and Matisse, it becomes striking how, relatively speaking, their painterly surfaces in a given painting show a uniform all-over texture. Though not to an absolute extent, areas of diverse hue, scale, distance, and the like will show a similar fatness of paint, planarity, and so on. This is justified, with respect to the representation of diverse objects, by the understanding that what is really being rendered is always light, in the formula most familiar with the Impressionists.

Titian, though their ancestor, was also actively concerned with the distinctions not only between velvet and human skin, but hair and pearls, iron and stone, grass and bark. To juxtapose two or three such surfaces in tight association is one of his prime ways of calling us to respond pleasurably. He adds to visual stimuli those that call up in us the memory of touch, for every one of these surfaces is of a *nice* kind, a restriction that ought to be pointed out too. They are reinforced, in case we might still not take them in, by passing through a light filter which marks them as gleams and sparks, token of a link to movement and thus to life.

Titian was also not the inventor of such textural differentials, of course. Jan van Eyck is only the most conspicuous of his predecessors, and was not only a total master of such effects, but of letting light extend them from plain reporting to excited celebration as something valuable. Titian had access to works produced in Jan's tradition, if not to his own, and surely respected them, a connection that remains to be explored in the literature. That is probably because the two artists differ so in paint application, and that factor has dominated the criteria for assigning historical linkage in the era in question. Jan presents his textures with what we call a "tight" brush stroke, and his few followers in modern times—the most obvious, though only partial, such imitator is probably Dali—largely for that reason are rated as not modern. Titian, however, brought a perhaps unique power to a synergy of variable textural imitation and "Impressionist" brushwork. Even his earliest great successor, Rubens, though not yet influenced by the view that *things* ought not to be imitated by an ambitious artist, shifted the balance far toward the single-note brush stroke. To be Jan van Eyck and Rubens in one—what a *tour de force*, and Titian did it!

The very earliest significant writer on Titian, his personal friend Pietro Aretino, provided a model of focusing his admiration on the renderings of textures that has been little followed. The catalogue of the exhibition rightly quotes several such passages. In one he speaks together of "the crimson of the garment" of a saint and "a lynx," in another of an angel's cheeks which tremulously combine "milk and blood"—the commentator unfortunately labels this an effort to isolate the artist's use of color—in another he speaks of the artist's "sense of things in his brush."

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One of the better reasons for bringing Titian's works together in an exhibition is perhaps the opportunity it offers to see many very diverse such "things in the brush," evoking the artist's versatile command. In the *St. Jerome* from the Thyssen collection it is, unexpectedly, the old hermit's sagging skin and the pulled strokes of tree branches (along with the crucifix); they remind us that all this is additionally in the service of the drama of human experience, as for all Renaissance painting. When a saint gives alms to a beggar, the tiny gleam of the silver coin's edge at the center of the composition lets the lighted matter focus the drama and the moral too. In the huge painting of Tityus, naked and sprawling, still a system of muscles while he yields to the eternal torture in hell of having his intestines bitten out by a vulture, there is a similar dark glint of a link of chain, but everything else—in this rare subject—tells of the body as tragic fate. The moral is that this is the sentence for a crime, Tityus having tried to rape Latona, the mother of Apollo. The artist's analysis certainly is more complex than in the more frequent female nudes.

These male figures, naked, clothed, or in between, suffer or work out their lives alone. The more numerous females are generally accompanied by male figures, whom they usually dominate. As the Venus in Washington checks her face in the mirror, she has a small naked boy hold that heavy object at the best angle, while another one stretches to cover her head with the wreath, the crown that explains to us what her concern is, her royal primacy in physical beauty. Another Venus, in the Borghese Gallery, in a grouping that has baffled all interpreters, blindfolds the same little boy—who is an analogue to the very young pages who attend on generals in other images—while a pair of young women approach with expressions of adoration. The grand nude Venus relaxing on a couch, from the Prado, has as her one occupation listening to the music played by an organist; she is the person of leisure, he is the employee. He pauses from performing the music for a moment, very possibly while a chord is fading off, and seizes the occasion, just at the present time of the painting, to stare at her, inspecting the part of her body he would not otherwise see. Venus is naked because that is her mythological attribute, but at the same time the event of the organ recital is of the modern world; Titian is like other artists of his time in making the ambiguity serve him.

Many writers, not only feminist ones, have reasonably seen the result as a visual metaphor of the nude being, for Titian's clients, in the first instance a picture of a sex object, and this emphasis is quite plain in writings of the time, quoted in the catalogue. The implication would then seem to be that the role of the various male figures in the same paintings also calls for analysis; that this has not happened in feminist writing is natural enough, as much because of its specialist limits as because the paintings have become counters in a "political agenda." By the same token, however, such readings evidently could not claim to have come closer to a more complete reading of the historical conditions that the works document than before, even while they have the merit of implying this second issue. Supplied with these male servants, the naked women have built on their role as sex objects to become so many Pompadours, controlling exploited labor—of both sexes—among whom the adult male gets some of his pay metaphorically in a fantasy of sexual happiness. Rather than a scenario worked up by Titian or his clients, this no doubt relates to the Venetian phenomenon of the grand courtesan, such as the especially famous Veronica Franco who received the King of France in her fine house, for conversation only, and gave him a copy of her poems. Titian does not seem to explore the related convention of his era, of the male reduced to slavery by the desired woman, Samson reduced to imprisonment by Delilah being one of the many such, often presented as a group. (This is however a woodcut of this subject after his design.) More interestingly, when the male figure with the naked female gets a major role, he may be Tarquin. The story of his rape of Lucretia, also a theme for

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Shakespeare not many years later, is the only theme of Titian's of which the exhibition offers us two related variant paintings.[2] She is once nude and once clothed. Titian departs from the most usual moment of the story in his culture, when she commits suicide, which was explicitly a moral of the virtue enjoined on women by men. Borrowing instead the design of a tiny German engraving, in both cases, as scholars have discovered, he reports the moment of the attack itself, with Tarquin pointing his dagger; as he swings his arm back, his weapon is the object nearest us. In the wrinkled velvet clothes that mark the vibrating of his body, he confronts the resisting but failing Lucretia, both in graphic profile.

Presuming, as we should, that a male audience is expected, it emerges that the moral is to indict Tarquin for sin against the woman whose humanity he does not see, but which we do. It is the step preceding the punishment of Tityus for the attempted rape and, even more vividly, that shown in the Judith with the head of Holofernes, from Detroit. In the story, her decapitation of the amorous male is possible because she had rightly assumed he would invite her to his bed, and when he had drunk a great deal she performed what was fundamentally a political assassination of her national enemy. Contrary to the tradition of his time, Titian shows her smiling, in three-quarter length, looking out at us, a queen meeting her admiring people. By a variation that continues to baffle observers, the smooth and finished modeling of her face contrasts in an extreme way with the sketchy roughness of his, held in front of her as an attribute. The splintered grayish strokes closely resemble those used throughout the clothed version of the *Lucretia*. One art-historical explanation, that the work was done at two widely separated times in Titian's career, seems not to survive in recent discussion. It is more plausible that the painting was not finished, except for the focal center of the heroine's face, something that is quite likely to have happened in the Metropolitan Museum's *Venus* too. Here, however, we seem to have a case like those of Michelangelo's unfinished works, in which the image is expressively complete. And it is possible that Titian too may have registered that circumstance, despite the violation of craft norms of the time. The great *Flaying of Marsyas* hung nearby, a rough sketch throughout, also reports the torture and death of a sinner, in this case one whose crime was against art.

Among Titian's nude themes, it is the story of Danae, of which he painted three versions, that seems to have involved him most. It was common for him to paint later versions of his works for other clients, but the major revisions in both the second and third are unique in his work. It is too bad that only the first is in the exhibition, for comparisons in such cases are one of the best justifications for such shows, and a room of the three of them would have been glorious. Each version, as all agree, is more fluid and spontaneous in painting than the one before, and it seems plausible that this quality is connected with the theme, where Danae is both aware and comfortable about the god's sexual approach. No male figure is present, other than the standard naked small boy in the first version; in the others, a busy old woman replaces him, and the unusual all-female world ruled by Danae seems in tune with the special effect of harmonious mutuality in the experience. Zeus, as the myth requires, arrives in the bodiless form of a spatter of gold coins, again glinting, as a small-scale central key to the story. He is thus lessened visually, yet heightened as a mobile actor. We might read him as money, and it has been argued that the reference again is to courtesans. It is certainly different from paintings with rapes that are going to be punished, or have been, or Diana's punishment of the intrusive Actaeon that Titian also explored more than once.

While the image of money may be relevant to the clients, Titian's own quiet life suggests

2 When this exhibition was shown in Venice, only one of the Lucretia paintings was present, but another such pair was shown, two variant images of Mary Magdalene.

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another aspect. He differed in this way from all his peers, Raphael, Leonardo, Michelangelo, who traveled to get to the great jobs, entrepreneurial buccaneers of art, a bit like unattached oil riggers or other much sought-after skilled producers in our time. Titian was so domestic that he stayed in his house with his rather large family, not only receiving friends and important callers there, but requiring nearly all his grand clients to have their paintings shipped. We have no information, as usual, about the personality of Cecelia, his wife, but it seems likely that her husband at any rate found life as described satisfying. He married her after they had lived together and had children, a phenomenon less common then than now. For whatever reason, the *Danae* especially suggests that Titian wanted to think about women's experience, and whether or not he succeeded, he produced a rare image trying to do so, one that may be compared with Joyce's reading of Molly Bloom. To be sure, he was not an absolute innovator here either, being indebted to a *Danae* by Correggio as well as Michelangelo's *Leda*.

On the other hand, a more limited reading of what he is doing may be supported by the analogy of the portrait, not in the exhibition, he did at the same time as the first *Danae* for the same client, Pope Paul III with his grandsons (sweetly transformed into nephews in the exhibition catalogue). The bent, aged pope clutches the arms of his chair, one youth bows extraordinarily low, the other stands back in shadow. Writers have been almost unanimous in reading senility, sycophancy and corruption here, as in a clear-eyed political satire. Yet as Francis Haskell has also observed,[3] that is not credible in a commissioned and accepted work for a great client from whom Titian sought favors (a well-paying job for his son); to think of it as speaking out against the establishment too quickly imposes our "good" ways on the admired artist; anthropologists have taught us to accept the divergent ways of faraway cultures as equally right behavior, but we have learned less well to do the same for historically remote ones. My reading of the portrait is that it registers at the highest the physical habits of the people, wanting them alive; those habits of gesture and the like may themselves imply their moral state, but he was not after that. *Danae* may be a similar case.

Nineteenth-century admirers of Titian naturally were silent on such factors, praising the nudes almost solely for their visual forms, often with valuable insights. It has been helpful for feminist and other recent writers to add these other approaches, though some have been no less "reductive" than the predecessors they condemn. A concern with the client's motives will not be illuminating if it never asks why a client should want the picture by Titian more than another, less erotic picture, but also more than some other equally sensual picture by a lesser artist, such as a routine bit of pornography. The brilliance of Titian's painting evidently also concerned the client, and is also most often what has got observers to become involved with art history to begin with, so leaving it out of analyses is puzzling as well as sad. To be sure, it is harder to define than social ties. When the painting is "read" solely as a social illustration, we have art history without the art, a handicapped way of doing things that is of concern mainly because it is so widespread.

All concerned agree that Titian belongs to an astonishing small group of artists who define the peak of artistic achievement in their time. This group includes Leonardo, Raphael, and Michelangelo, each of whom also defines a peak for all of Western culture. Titian, however, does not; he is somehow less of a name than the rest. Partly this is because he lacks an interesting biography and vivid personality, things that have so captivated posterity about Leonardo and Michelangelo. Much is due to the absence from his work of huge projects that can be read as a single key to his art, giving an instant focus. The tradition of critical analysis is less strong for him, beginning with the lesser interest of

3 See Mr. Haskell's review of the Venice version of the exhibition, in *The New York Review of Books*, August 16, 1990.

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Vasari and continuing today in the lack of anything like Clark on Leonardo or any of several lesser, but symptomatic, lives of Michelangelo. Without the travels and the monumental projects, Titian at home simply kept on with his painting, canvas after canvas. The idea of his greatness has been mainly in the keeping of the artists of later centuries, especially in the mainstream of the French tradition.

The closest to a grand series by Titian is perhaps the three Ovidian myths for the Duke of Ferrara, easily and soon scattered since they are portable canvases and much wanted. All this helps to explain the almost insuperable difficulty of a Titian exhibition, over and above those that apply to the other masters. A more or less ideal Titian show would have had to be like the Museum of Modern Art's gigantic Picasso show, giving us the whole artist. There are 321 Titian paintings extant, according to Wethey's convenient catalogue; what is the minimum to show him right, assuming the optimum selection? It is certainly well over the seventy that this show was able to garner (a number including those shown only in one of its two venues) plus eight drawings and two woodcuts. And of course the curators could have their pick. Another justification could easily be found for it in the reassemblages already cited, as of the Danaes or the Ferrara myths, but not even one of the latter could be had, precisely because they are the most "important" Titians. The one reassemblage offered here rejoins the ceiling painting of John Evangelist with the many tiny canvases making up its original framing decoration, but the small scale and large role of assistants in this set of ornamental heads and bodies did not add very much, even after all the good and careful work.

Another way to justify a show is to bring in many works of uncertain authorship, with the plausible hope of reaching a decision about them, on the model of the Metropolitan's Caravaggio show. This exhibition did that hardly at all, and the catalogue tended to hide the few such cases, since each entry is prepared by a staff member of the owning institution, and so reads like an official communiqué. A small show could work in another way if it showed, as it were, Titian's greatest hits, like an illustrated book, but as already noted that could hardly happen, and to the extent it did so was visible only in Venice. Of the seventy-four works shown in that earlier venue, an exceptionally high thirty-one were seen there only, though only a few even of these would be on most people's top list. Only forty-three paintings traveled to Washington, thus excluding all the drawings and prints that could have offered a valuable variety and food for exploration.[4] Six were added there. These look like what could be had for external reasons, but perhaps not much more than the whole exhibition does.

What results is low key; almost half of the exhibition consists either of single portraits, mostly in three-quarter length with plain backgrounds, or of Madonnas, mostly in pastoral landscapes. These were the successful artist's bread-and-butter jobs—which he then did, one must quickly add, with beautiful solutions and entire command, each one gently different, but largely the same in their larger aspects; they did not push him far. It is like seeing a series of the smaller houses of Frank Lloyd Wright. Half a dozen more are either single saints or such standard church subjects as the Annunciation, intermediate between the simple accepted patterns of the portraits and the total engagement with creation we are likeliest to see in the secular works. It is not futile to have one's attention concentrated on this minor Titian, which shows more than most painters' major works, though a visit to see those permanently on view in the Prado or Vienna or their various locations in Venice would be likely to provide more. The exhibition benefits people who have a harder time getting to Madrid than to Washington (as it disadvantages those in the opposite position)—but if that should be considered a prime

4 Six of these are owned by the National Gallery and are on permanent display there.

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reason for doing it, the role is performed much better by the kind of show that directly addresses that point by lending one museum's works in numbers for display elsewhere, as recently with the Fitzwilliam and the Courtauld in New York. But they do not generate as much hoopla.

I agree with Francis Haskell's list of bad reasons for which exhibitions like this are held: funding that comes because it undergirds governmental or corporate claims to support culture, while promoting the careers and good living of curators, and—one might add—facilitates the publishing of essays like his and mine. It may, as in the case of the Titian catalogue, promote the assignment of scarce publishing funds to rather poor publications. This one shows disastrous copy editing ("for he who wishes," "For he who enters"; a writer "inconceivably deduced," where I think "incredibly" was meant; "the Marchesa from Este" for Isabella d'Este, who did not come from there) as well as incompetence with Italian. Pietro Aretino did not say of a portrait of a pope that it shows "how he is alive, how he is now and how he is true," but something like how the portrait "is alive, is himself, is a true likeness." All this reflects the hurry to a deadline that helps to explain why catalogues are not considered as full examples of art historical scholarship. (So, as a larger element, does the absence of peer review, replaced too often by job status as a basis for having entries published.)

But I do not agree with Mr. Haskell's most emphatic arguments for abolishing such exhibitions—for complex reasons that may be as much based on speculation as his, and go far afield. Rather I would draw from this one, in the imperfections of its origins and results, what it can teach and give in pleasure. It gives us comfortably the Titian of the usual procedure, the level out of which his peaks lift, something that may have been left unarticulated because no one could have set out to make that the distinction of an exhibition.

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Rebecca West: the fictions of fact and the facts of fiction

by Gloria G. Fromm

To write about Rebecca West is to deal in larger and larger uncertainties—uncertainties, often enough, that are taken for the currency of fact and truth. Despite the claims of a few critics with special interests, the verdict of literary history has yet to be reached on a sprawling body of work full of unexpected twists and turns—from St. Augustine and Proust to England's wartime incubus, Lord Haw-Haw; from best-selling fiction to wide-ranging lectures at prestigious universities. Rebecca West was always taking the world, and perhaps even herself, by surprise, venturing into new territory (Yugoslavia, the Nuremberg trials, a South Carolina courtroom), mixing modes and genres—and no doubt "memory and desire" as well. It was an astonishing career for the mere chit of a girl—barely nineteen—whose clever sallies first appeared in the feminist *Freewoman* and the socialist *Clarion* in 1911 and 1912, who became the darling of Harold Ross's *New Yorker* and the scourge of Communist sympathizers in the Forties and Fifties, and who died a Dame Commander of the British Empire in 1983. But if the general outlines raise eyebrows, the biographical record is a tangle of conflict and contradiction, much of it produced by Rebecca West herself. She "lived her life operatically," as Victoria Glendinning has put it, "tinker[ing] endlessly with the story-line, the score, and the libretto. [And] the plot remains"—in a mild manner of speaking—"unresolved."[1]

The Wests who concern us, however, in fact and fiction, in life and art, offstage and on, are scarcely noted for gentleness. Beginning with Ibsen's heroine, who provided a lasting image (if not an "imago") as well as a name for the young girl born Cicely (she preferred Cicily) Fairfield nearly a hundred years ago, the lineage is marked by intensely strong convictions and by feelings that run to violent extremes. It has been no secret, for example, that between Rebecca West and her son Anthony, who was also the son of H. G. Wells, there were bitter quarrels and fierce antagonisms until the very end, each believing the worst about the other. Indeed, a rancorous summary of their relationship made its way into the long-deferred biography of his father that Anthony West published the year after his mother died.[2] By then, to be sure, other resentments had surfaced or formed, notably one directed for obscure reasons at Dorothy Richardson, whose portrait of Wells as Hypo Wilson in her multi-volume novel *Pilgrimage* Anthony West himself described to me in the Sixties as "absolutely accurate," and whose "kindness" to him on several visits with her in the late Forties he recalled with gratitude. The attack on Richardson amounted to a complete reversal of judgment on Anthony West's part, but the diatribe against his

1 *Rebecca West: A Life*, by Victoria Glendinning, was published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1987.

2 *H. G. Wells: Aspects of a Life*, by Anthony West, was published by Random House in 1984.

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mother differed mainly in degree from the representations of her he had been offering up since the Fifties. Whatever is finally made of this relationship between mother and son —not understood, it would seem, by either of the principals—its unhappy character remains, along with a pattern of emotional response that repeats itself in Rebecca West's career and accounts for some striking anomalies that none of her critics have confronted.

Anthony West's own career as a writer —unlike his mother's—began late, after unsuccessful attempts, as he put it, to avoid the profession that was bound to involve him in "odious comparisons." But his first novel, published in 1949 when he was thirty-five and winning for him an Anglo-American fiction award, set off instead the dispute with Rebecca West that made both his scathing denunciation of her and the biography of Wells inevitable. For the advertisements of the novel identified Anthony's famous parents and also provided the information that he was at work on a biography of his father, who had died in 1946. His mother objected strenuously to this public acknowledgment of her ten-year liaison with Wells, even though it had been widely known at the time, on the grounds that it would now seem to sanction the writing of "scandal" (her own word) about the two of them and might also interfere with her journalistic work, especially in America. She was certainly in the news then, having been in fact on the cover of *Time* magazine following the publication (in 1947) of *The Meaning of Treason*, controversial essays that had appeared in part in *The New Yorker* and were based on the postwar trials in England of William Joyce (Lord Haw-Haw) and various other accused traitors and spies. Before that, she had sat in on the closing sessions of the trial of Nazi war criminals in Nuremberg and written them up for *The Daily Telegraph* as meditations on twentieth-century culture, reprinted later in *A Train of Powder* (1955)—all of this testifying to the reputation she was earning as a toughminded (some said narrow, reductive, and paranoid) political moralist, with perhaps her harshest words for scientists like Alan Nunn May, convicted of passing on information about atomic energy to the Russians. He was one of those "highly gifted intellectuals," she said, who were also "infantilists."

One would think Rebecca West's old affair with H. G. Wells hardly worth anyone's attention, but she was determined to have no reference made to it in print. She had already forced the editors of *Time* to remove a paragraph alluding to her relationship with Wells and the birth of their son, so that her response to the advertisements of Anthony's first novel was predictable: she was opposed to the biographical project no less than to the naming of his parents. The reports of what took place at this juncture vary a good deal, though there is no disputing the central fact that Anthony put off the biography of his father for thirty-odd years. Glendinning's simple explanation seems plausible on the surface but fails to reckon with the emotionally charged nature of the project or with the conflicting accounts of its fate. She describes how the Wells family, after agreeing to the biography and handing over four suitcases of Wells's letters and papers to Anthony, learned from his mother (who mentioned it "without realizing its implications") that he was about to leave for America "for an unspecified period." Since the papers were still uncatalogued and uninsured, the Wells family recalled them. Glendinning does not mention, however, that before he left the country, Anthony wrote to Dorothy Richardson, with whom he had talked at length about his planned life of Wells, to say that he was giving it up in view of the strong objections on both sides—from some members of his father's family as well as from his mother. One Wells relation, he told her, had said that instead of going around pronouncing himself H. G. Wells's son, he ought to regard himself as a "dirty little secret." Not surprisingly, it seemed to him that Rebecca West was taking the same view by insisting on concealment. And the more this drove him to harp on his identity, the more betrayed by each other they came to feel.

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For both of them—it is clear—trust, loyalty, allegiance, betrayal were recurrent, obsessive themes, not only shared but also developed—along their separate lines—into personal crusades. Rebecca West had argued in *The Meaning of Treason* for the reciprocal obligations between a nation and its citizens. In effect, Anthony was assuming that the relationship with one's parent involved similar obligations on both sides, including in this case support of the person his mother had made him, support he did not get. As a result, while Rebecca West explored the family dynamics and the private motives of a range of criminal types (from South Carolina lynchers to black-sheep sons of respectable Britons), Anthony was working out his own discontents in novels that would read increasingly like autobiography rather than fiction and culminate in *Heritage* (1955), the book his mother could never forgive, which obviously drew much of its material from his difficult childhood years.

The boy in the novel is the illegitimate son of world-renowned parents who keep their relationship to him secret: a professional actress for whom role-playing comes naturally and a hugely successful writer with an active extramarital sex life. Rebecca West (who had given the stage a brief try in her youth and would cast herself as an actress in the only novel she wrote about her affair with Wells) responded to *Heritage* as though it were not fiction at all, and "actually complained"—according to Victoria Glendinning—that "many incidents in the book were 'invented.'" Yet the portrait of her that emerged was basically sympathetic—and much more credible than the later one penned by an aging and equally unforgiving Anthony West in his biography of Wells, which by then he firmly believed his mother had sabotaged years back.

The road to *Heritage* and beyond, in other words, had been paved by both of them. Admittedly Anthony's novel was a double blow to Rebecca West because he had described it to her beforehand as a "light book." In view of what it turned out to be—a fictionalized version of his own strained youth and adolescence—she thought the adjective was cruelly insensitive. But for his part, he might well have argued that he meant mainly to contrast *Heritage* with its predecessors, which were dark novels indeed. They also had distinct affinities with his mother's recent writings, and she was especially proud of Anthony's first book, describing it to one of her friends as "magnificent." Published in England as *On a Dark Night* and in this country the following year as *The Vintage*, its central character is a lawyer who commits suicide after the war-crimes trial in which he served as one of the prosecutors, only to find himself paired in the next world—forever—with the German he helped hang. The novel, set entirely in the afterworld, traces the gradual awakening of the lawyer to his own moral nature through an agonizing process of recollection and confrontation. In the end, offered a draught of the "sweet water" that would bring him everything he had ever wanted—"freedom from guilt, freedom from sin, an eternity of pleasure and delight" (but only if he agreed to give up his individuality)—he decides to drink instead from the brownish scum-filled water that will cause him to remember every single thing he had "ever done or felt or seen or known: every little petty lie, every deceit, every shame." Even worse, as he is warned, he will "feel every feeling" he had ever roused in others, scorn for his deceits, contempt for his ignobilities, "the pain that hurt those who loved [him], the hatred of those who hated [him]."

No one could have read Anthony West's promising first novel—with its existentialist theme and its Kierkegaardian overtones—as a blueprint of what was later to come from the son who would remember everything his mother had ever made him feel "from the first to the last." Nor were there any such indications in his second novel, *Another Kind* (1951), which probably owed something to the breakdown of his first marriage but a good deal more to his mother's views. It took up two of her most compelling concerns—the vital distinction that had to be made, she felt, between good and evil in the public realm as well as the private; and the

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seductive appeal that it seemed to her death had for most human beings. Anthony's novel is a futuristic blend of political, ethical, and personal preoccupations. If his first novel had shown that not even by suicide could a man escape from himself, the second sought to dispel two contemporary illusions—that Communism was a desirable form of government and that sex was an unfailing means of personal fulfillment. Civil war is thus pictured as inevitable in postwar, strike-prone, labor-dominated England, and leads to a takeover by the Russians, which effectively destroys most people's faculty for making moral distinctions. At the same time, in the private lives of the central characters, ideals of love and sex are exposed as shams, constructed solely out of selfish desires. Given Rebecca West's personal history, it is hard to believe that in treating sex as an instrument of self-delusion he did not have his mother as well as himself in mind.

When *Heritage* appeared (but only in the United States) a few years later, Anthony had established residence here, married again, and also begun to write for *Time* and *The New Yorker*. Though Rebecca West found no comfort in it, this third novel ended on a newly positive note, with the young man looking forward—after a painful and confused adolescence—to a life free of childish misconceptions about both his parents and the role they would play in his future. But the young man's name in the novel was Richard Savage, intended to evoke the early-eighteenth-century poet immortalized by Samuel Johnson, who believed that his mother wanted him dead. Anthony West admitted years later that he did not believe this of his own mother and that the melodramatic naming of his character had been "a mistake." At the same time, he was convinced that she wished him ill, that her intentions toward him were anything but benign. On her side, as one might expect, Rebecca West's personal correspondence is full of lengthy, detailed, exasperated letters about her problem-son, whose mission in life—she had decided—was to wreck her career. What has gone virtually unnoticed are the signs in her professional as well as her private life of Anthony's distinct imprint. Put another way, her relationship with him—confrontational and oppositional to the bitter end—can hardly be viewed in isolation. On the contrary, it not only shows up in the character and style of her writing but also helps to explain the discordant split between the two principal components—fiction and nonfiction—of her unusual career.

Anthony had been born—appropriately, as it would turn out—the day the Great War began, when Rebecca West had already attracted attention as an irreverent young journalist willing and able to handle a surprising range of contemporary issues. Nobody was sacred, nothing exempt from her vitriolic pen. Regularly, in the pages of *The Freewoman* and *The Clarion*, she pronounced on the position of women, the Labour Party, the Church, race relations, current fiction—all with remarkable authority and often withering scorn. She wanted the vote, for example, and was willing to fight for it—as a necessary first step to the election of women to Parliament. Her goals for the sex and for herself were far from modest, her rhetoric clearly designed to catch the eye: "[U]nless there is something horribly perverse in the order of things, fifteen years spent in bearing and rearing children ought to be a better preparation for the business of governing than an equal space of time spent in cross-examining scoundrels." She was also rapidly mastering the art of the verbal thrust. Olive Schreiner, whose "aggressive personality" she much preferred to her writing, was "less a woman than a geographical fact." And in disputing feminine stereotypes, she declared that Walter Pater and A. C. Benson, but not the unmarried May Sinclair, were "typical spinsters," because their experience was limited to their own sex. Though her reading of fiction was sometimes superficial, clever rather than acute, Wells, for one, had been sufficiently taken by her reviews of *his* novels to want to meet her. What followed is, of course, at the same time well-known and *un*known: a stormy and steamy love affair

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whose beginning, middle, and end come in different versions. But most accounts agree that the feisty girl who wrote what she pleased and relished a good squabble with all sorts of "reactionary" males found herself on the receiving end of things when she had a child without being married. To her surprise and dismay, she became the object of social scorn even from her own servants, who saw through her attempts at concealment and the shifts and stratagems she employed. All of this was a far cry from the exhilarating sense of power her writing and its immediate reception must have given her between 1911, when she began to contribute to *The Freewoman*, and 1914, when the circumstances of her life threw her on the defensive. The various fictions she and Wells tried to impose on their son as well as on the servants did not work, as Anthony West was to describe with great poignancy both in *Heritage* and a series of later stories about his childhood (in which he was no longer calling himself Richard Savage). But the effects of a "make-believe" household run on pretense and denials were not felt by Anthony alone, for in Rebecca West's not-so-distant past lay a childhood, scarcely forgotten, that was filled with its own anomalies and ambiguities.

She had grown up in south London and Edinburgh, in a stimulating but unsettled family environment dominated by an attractive, mercurial man who left the family when his youngest daughter was eight. Not much is known about Charles Fairfield beyond what Rebecca West has told of him with some rancor in *Family Memories*, published posthumously, and more fondness in *The Fountain Overflows* (1956), one of her best-known novels. She was never able to see him whole, as it were, no doubt in part because he seemed to be several people at once but also, one suspects, because she did not want to. Unlike Christina Stead, with whose perfectly tempered portrait of a similar personality (in *The Man Who Loved Children*, published in 1940) Rebecca West's has been compared, she could not reconcile her great love and her equally great resentment. There is no question, however, that Charles Fairfield's influence—both good and bad—lasted to the end of her life. A shrewd analyst of current events, he introduced her to the world of newspapers (he wrote for several) and politics, providing a conservative anti-socialist, anti-women's-suffrage base from which she could deviate as a rebellious young girl, only to formulate her own conservative ethic in the years to come. He also liked to gamble away the family's security. And he was "chronically unfaithful to his wife," behavior his daughter claimed to have registered at an early age. "There were a thousand signals," she would say years later, when summing him up in *Family Memories* and concluding—from her own experience, she said—that men had "extra-marital relationships out of hostility to their wives." They "dislike[d] women in general," she had decided long before, and since a wife was a woman with "the law on her side," they "punish[ed] her by denying her sexual satisfaction."

In her old age, Rebecca West's judgment on men was harsh and bitter indeed, no doubt because they had always made up the primary figures in her psychic landscape. Along with Charles Fairfield and Wells, there was Lord Beaverbrook, with whom she had a brief, unsatisfying affair that she wrote about in her unfinished novel *Sunflower*; there was Henry Maxwell Andrews, the pedantic, aristocratic-looking banker whom she married in 1930, to everyone's astonishment; and there was Anthony who, like the others, mainly thwarted her. For though the marriage to Andrews provided the social status she felt she had lacked, their physical relationship did not last. And when he died in 1968, she learned from his private papers that he had been a more discreet version of the philandering Charles Fairfield. The moral she finally drew was that marriage did not pay—at least for women like her, who were far too successful for most men. But she also permitted herself to say, with a characteristic Westian swerve of the emotions, that she "would have been a good wife to almost any man, [in order] to live decently in a house with children."

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Apparently she believed this about herself, and certainly such sentiments run like a banal fault line through the entire body of her work, but most visibly in her fiction. There, you might say, Rebecca West's late-Victorian origins and her middle-class upbringing prevail. In other words, her literary personality—formed in the transitional years of the first part of this century—was split between old and new ways of feeling as well as speaking. Not merely suffering from the old identity crisis, as it used to be called, Rebecca West also had the symptoms associated with the current view that firm identities are nothing but fictions, that there are no selves, only families of images sometimes thought of, or collected, as a self-image. In Rebecca West's case, the fictions and the contradictory self-images abound—with the "good wife to almost any man" rubbing shoulders with the devastating critic of writers like Wells and Arnold Bennett for harboring commonplace views of the sexual relationship, and loose lush novels alternating with nonfictional prose that seemed to have been written by someone else.

As anyone can hear who listens, Rebecca West had more than one literary voice from the very beginning. When even the first of her published stories, "Indissoluble Matrimony," is placed alongside any of the essays or reviews written at the same time, their different styles are glaringly evident. Appearing in 1914 in Wyndham Lewis's short-lived magazine *Blast* and collected not long ago in *The Young Rebecca*, this early fiction is hardly the "brilliant" piece described by Jane Marcus, the collection's editor.[3] It does indeed "foreshadow" the later fiction, as Marcus says, though not in the sense she means. Glendinning calls the story "lurid," which is surely a better fit. "Indissoluble Matrimony" portrays a young woman with the sexual appetite usually attributed to the male of the species rather than the female. Her husband —desperate for relief—tries to drown her and fails, at which she merely yawns. But aside from the aggressive role-reversal projected by a feminist author, the story carries a rather different and important message in its style—that for Rebecca West fiction seemed to require a particular kind of writing and expression:

> The blood was coursing violently under her luminous yellow skin, and her lids, dusky with fatigue, drooped contentedly over her great humid black eyes. Perpetually she raised her hand to the mass of black hair that was coiled on her thick golden neck and stroked it with secretive enjoyment, as a cat licks its fur. And her large mouth smiled frankly, but abstractedly, at some digested pleasure.

To *The Clarion*, however, in December 1912, she had contributed prose like this:

> Charity is an ugly trick. It is a virtue grown by the rich on the graves of the poor. Unless it is accompanied by sincere revolt against the present social system, it is cheap moral swagger. In former times it was used as fire insurance by the rich, but now that the fear of Hell has gone along with the rest of revealed religion, it is used either to gild mean lives with nobility or as a political instrument.

And for *The Daily News* a bit later, she reviewed a book about Wells with these opening lines:

> Mr Van Wyck Brooks is one of those young American writers who would have made excellent wives and mothers. He fails from sheer excess of the housewifely qualities. He is saving: just as in happier circumstances he would have put every scrap into the stockpot, so now he refuses to throw away the very driest bone of thought, and insists on boiling it up into his mental soup. He is hospitable: the deadest idea does not get turned away from his doorstep. He is cleanly: his bleached, scentless style suggests that he hung out the English language on the line in the dry, pure breezes of Boston before he used it.

3 *The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West 1911-1917*, selected and introduced by Jane Marcus, was published by Viking in 1982.

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Radical differences such as these—in sensibility, language, syntax—are apparent in Rebecca West's first two books as well: the shrewd, plain-spoken critical study of Henry James (1916), who had just died, and the short, sentimental novel *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), with its undercurrent of animosity toward the male for not keeping faith with the woman he loved. They add up—these differences—to more than Victoria Glendinning, for one, will allow, when she remarks in her introduction to the novel that "[t]o readers more used to [Rebecca West's] analytic trenchancy and her deflationary wit her lyrical writing may cause a subtle unease: it is like seeing a panther playing very tenderly with a butterfly." Samuel Hynes comes closer to the mark when he describes *The Return of the Soldier* as "more nearly a 'woman's novel' . . . than anything else [Rebecca West] wrote," but he is unwilling to admit its relation to the rest of her fiction.[4] What *The Return of the Soldier* signifies, most of all, is an attitude toward the sexes and the sex-relation that prevailed throughout Rebecca West's writing as well as her private life. Men, it seemed to her, were separate, other beings who, despite her feminist bravado, usually had the upper hand, which she deeply resented but at the same time had grown up accepting. And inclined as she always was to think in terms of antitheses—intellectual, moral, sexual—she put fiction, from the first, on the feminine or personal side of the ledger. One is almost tempted to say that she wrote fiction as a woman addressing women and nonfiction as a man speaking to men; and men were patently more important in her eyes than women, which means that fiction counted for less in the larger world of public affairs, the world inhabited by all the men who mattered to her. But she made money by fiction, and continued to write it until the mid Thirties, when an invitation to Yugoslavia became the prelude to *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* (1941), the prodigious study of an entire region and its cultural past that made her famous.

The fiction she wrote in the Twenties and Thirties, however, is quite another matter. *The Judge* (1922), which followed *The Return of the Soldier*, was a long novel with a plot that no amount of special pleading can portray as anything but preposterous. From the stoning of an unmarried pregnant woman by her village neighbors to her rape later on by the man who had married her with the promise never to touch her, and the murder—in the end—of the hapless son born of this rape, a murder committed by his more splendidly endowed older brother, the events in *The Judge* leave one breathless. Likewise the matching language, figurative to an absurd extreme: "In the end he had gone into a café and drunk manzanilla, and with the limp complaisance of a wrecked seasick man whose raft has shivered and left him to the mercy of an octopus . . ." Or: "And outside the hall, when they found that the mist, like a sour man who will not give way to his temper but keeps on dropping disagreeable remarks, was letting down just enough of itself to soak Edinburgh without giving it the slightest hope that it would rain itself out by the morning, he caught again this queer flavour of her that in its sharpness and its freshness reminded him of the taste of fresh celery." Victoria Glendinning may call this "painterly richness," and Jane Marcus "descriptive beauty" as well as "feminist intellectual power," but for Rebecca West's fellow-writer Virginia Woolf, whose ear I am more inclined to trust, *The Judge* "burst like an over-stuffed sausage."

At the time, Woolf was not alone in her damning criticism, but in our own day Rebecca West seems to have had little of the kind of treatment she herself meted out so superbly to other writers. Her next novel, for example, merits one of her own classic deflating lines about a couple of books she was reviewing: "Of course, one is glad that they have been written, just as one is glad that there are dog-shows at the Horticultural Show, even though one never goes near the

4 Mr. Hynes's discussion of *The Return of the Soldier* can be found in the introduction to his anthology *Rebecca West: A Celebration*, published by Viking in 1977.

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place oneself." *Harriet Hume* (1929) has the subtitle "A London Fantasy" and tells the serio-comic story of a beautiful woman—feminine to the core—and her politician-lover, who is determined to "rise in the world." Harriet discovers that loving him enables her, quite literally, to read his mind, which means that not only does she know what he plans to do with regard to *her* (leave her to marry a woman who will further his career) but also all his subsequent "guilt, and shame, and treachery." When he realizes how much she knows about him, he begins —like the husband in "Indissoluble Matrimony"—to wish her dead, though he does not actually attempt murder. What saves *Harriet Hume* (though just barely) from utter fatuousness are the conversations about politics, which provide the only authentic note. Otherwise, far from the "imaginative tour de force" it has been called, the novel is heavy as lead, weighted down with Rebecca West's private sex-quarrels turned into abstractions. Most decidedly, she did not have the gift for fantasy that her contemporaries Rose Macaulay and Virginia Woolf displayed—in *Orlando*, for example, published just the year before *Harriet Hume*, and in all the witty satiric novels Rose Macaulay had been publishing since the early Twenties.

But Rebecca West continued to compete in the Thirties, with fiction like the stories collected in *The Harsh Voice* (1935) and aimed at the women's-magazine market (they are simply beyond summarizing), and *The Thinking Reed* (1936), a novel meant to be satirical and amusing at the expense of the international social set, familiar enough to readers of Compton Mackenzie as well as Rose Macaulay, but lacking the requisite light touch. The master of the genre, of course, was Evelyn Waugh, beside whose tone-perfect prose Rebecca West's was ludicrous, prompting Virginia Woolf to ask exactly the right question about her Thirties fiction: "Why this dilly-dallying with the world and the flesh?"

Why indeed? When she had already shown —with her 1933 study of that "great romantic artist," St. Augustine—where her real talents lay, in what might be called "applied fiction," that is, the application of her fiction-making imagination to the analysis of historical (and contemporary) figures. Surely *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon* derives much of its fascination and readability from the running narrative and the personalized voice in all its opinionated inflections. Told in the first person as an account of her journey through Yugoslavia (in 1937) with her husband, who serves as both sounding-board and arbiter, it is a sumptuous blend of the real and the imaginary, of travelogue, story, and critical commentary on the workings—and failings—of civilization. The world, she was sure, would soon be at war again, and the reasons lay embedded in history, in the delusions about goodness and sacrifice, for example, that have reigned for hundreds of years. The black lamb and the grey falcon become universal emblems of the senseless slaughter through the ages and the continuing preference for death over life— for a heavenly kingdom over an earthly one—as depicted in the Slav epic poem about the Tsar and the choice he makes at Kossovo: to build a church instead of arming his soldiers against the Turks, who massacre both him and his army. But "all was holy, all was honourable/And the goodness of God was fulfilled." Yet despite its prophetic insights and its brilliant set pieces, the book suffers from the extremist characteristics that mar her "straight" fiction: looseness, a disproportionate emotional intensity, and portraits that seem almost like caricatures.

These failings are less present (though by no means absent) in *The Meaning of Treason* (revised in the Sixties as *The New Meaning of Treason*) and *A Train of Powder*, for here she had found her métier. The courtroom proceedings provided a ready-made structure, and though her method was to weave psycho-social narratives about the men in the dock, there were limits or boundaries established by certain known facts. The material might have been made to order, for by then she had also arrived at her mature political belief in the supreme importance of the rule of

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law, the interrelationship of the individual and the state, and the absolute threat represented by Communism as the successor to fascism—convictions that were not popular when she first expressed them and that involved her in bitter wars of words, especially during the McCarthy years. Without condoning McCarthy's "bullying tactics," she believed nonetheless that the investigations were necessary, and she held her ground, some would say courageously, others inflexibly and self-righteously, becoming in the process an embattled public personality.

She had theories as well as convictions, one of them that "the international organizations of Nazism and Communism fulfilled the needs of a lot of people who wanted to rebel against the father and mother and their own country." One would like to think Rebecca West understood in the end that human motives and behavior—her own and her son's, no less than the subjects of her "court commentary"—are never so simply explained, but it looks as though she wanted them to be, just as she wanted men to be men and women to be women. Her fiction makes this all too clear, revealing as it does the wishful, romantic tendencies beneath the implacable critic of false illusions in others, and explaining why she returned to the writing of novels in the mid Fifties. It can hardly be due to chance that *The Fountain Overflows* (her first novel in two decades, serialized in *Ladies' Home Journal*) appeared not long after Anthony's *Heritage*, or that it made extensive use for the first time of her own heritage. Moreover, as if to counter Anthony's portrait of *his* mother, she paid tribute to her own—for keeping the children together when Charles Fairfield left them. While the Aubrey family in *The Fountain Overflows* may not be Rebecca West's in every particular, there are close enough correspondences, so that her sister easily recognized herself in the cruel portrait of the eldest Aubrey girl. And like Anthony years before, Rebecca West denied any such intention—but with disclaimers that bore a striking resemblance to his. She also made one telling addition to the Aubrey family—of a faultlessly loving son named Richard, who would perish in the Great War.

Rebecca West fully intended to trace the Aubrey fortunes—and misfortunes—through at least two more volumes, but only one was actually finished before she died, and both were published posthumously. The last novel she *did* publish in her lifetime, *The Birds Fall Down* (1966), is a perfect specimen of the divided literary character I have been describing. While its political subject —treason—is handled brilliantly, its human content is hard to take seriously. An old tsarist count in exile and on a train journey with his eighteen-year-old granddaughter is joined en route by a man out of his past who tries to strip him of his nostalgic illusions and warn him of the double agent in his household. The extended talk between them is wonderful, a spellbinding account in Rebecca West's most compelling nonfictional voice of the background to the Russian revolution, but the rest of the novel is narrated by the granddaughter, who thinks like a ten-year-old. She is supposed to be putting together, piece by piece, what is going on around her (including her father's adultery), a method that worked marvelously for Sybille Bedford in the novel she published a decade earlier (*A Legacy*) but that Rebecca West was temperamentally unequipped to employ, having neither the subtlety of feeling nor the technical restraint required. The story she tells, moreover, is emotional fantasy, the stuff out of which Rebecca West's fiction was made from the start and which the posthumous publications demonstrate to a fault.

For all the fanfare surrounding them, the books published after Rebecca West's death have not enhanced her literary standing. *This Real Night* and *Cousin Rosamund* (about the Aubrey family) and *Sunflower*, a novel begun in the Twenties, when her relationship with Wells was ending, and never finished, are as "pulpy" as she ever got. These days, of course, this is more of a recommendation than it used to be, serving in some quarters to obscure the objectionable line be-

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tween high art and popular culture. Rebecca West herself aspired intellectually to the one—with all her critical instincts—and gravitated emotionally to the other. It was her fate to be caught in the gray middle, where few critics like to tread, preferring to exalt or dismiss. Neither of these extremes is viable for this infuriating woman of extremes, who could write so well about political relationships, about the pressures and delusions of ideologies, and sink to the level of the trite and the ordinary when it came to human relationships—the prime matter of fiction as well as of life. She was not alone, however, in exemplifying what is perhaps the ultimate paradox of the writing life—that fiction exposes you to the world while nonfiction permits an artful selection and arrangement of the internal wardrobe. Some writers (Lionel Trilling among them) may have given up fiction altogether for precisely this reason. In not giving it up entirely, Rebecca West ensured the very disclosures about herself she liked to claim she had never made. Fiction, it would seem, was the double agent in her own household.

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Poems *by Rachel Hadas, Eric Trethewey, John Matthias & C. H. Sisson*

Nostos

Having ploughed the ocean to its iron rim,
late in the day our warrior comes home.
The world, it seems, has nothing left to give
except his aging face,
except the memory
of captives mooning at the ruined wall,
dreaming of that high city by the sea
they longed to drown in.
He lets the picture lie
folded like the trousseau
stored in the chest in his ancestral hall—
lavender-scented rough cool sheets unused.
But wartime laundry flaps behind his gaze.
Offal and blood take on the shine of sand,
the specious cleanliness of what's behind.
Nothing to do but live the years to come.

—*Rachel Hadas*

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Prescription change

after Montaigne

It was summer, its rigors less forgiving then
than winter's cold curse. Besides discomfort
of heat, less easily remedied than its opposite,
besides the sun's pulse clanging in my head,
my eyes were pained by any dazzling light.

To deaden the whiteness of paper in a time
when reading was all in all to me, I could lay
a piece of clear glass on my book and find relief.
But now it's only with spectacles that I can see
as clearly as I ever did, as far as most men,

though as night comes on I feel a blur beginning
while I read—reading, a trial that has always
tired my eyes, especially at night, if in
subtler ways. So here's a step backward, just
barely perceptible. And I'll draw back another

and yet another, from the second to the third,
from the third to the fourth, so quietly
that I'll have to be a confirmed blind man at last
before the old age of my sight overwhelms me,
so artfully is the thread of each life untwisted.

Do you think my hearing is on the verge
of growing dull? You'll see that when I've lost
it by half, I'll be blaming still those voices
speaking around me, straining sense as we must
to make it feel itself ebbing, dying away.

—*Eric Trethewey*

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Academic poem

The headline says "a student
and his wife in double suicide . . ."
I read the article

hoping that it's not about someone I know.
It's not. It says that
Mr. A. S. Aptekar, an M.A. candidate

from India, "swallowed cyanide following
rejection Wednesday of his thesis."
So too his wife, and both of them left wills.

The paper says they also both left notes, that
both were "fully clothed
and on their bedroom floor" with Mr. Aptekar

"holding his wife in his arms."
And it's too late for me to do a thing.
It's too late to say, Please

Mr. Aptekar don't do it. Forget, Mr. Aptekar,
your silly thesis. Go back
to your village, let the sun shine on your face,

embrace your friends and kiss the earth
that bore you. Laugh aloud with
everyone about the habits of the comical Americans.

Walk beside the river flowing to
the Ganges and take off all your polyester clothes.
Lie down with your wife.

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Hold her in your arms! but please don't
hold her like you're holding her right now because
of the rejection Wednesday of your thesis.

Get up off the floor, God damn it,
pack your bags, get out of here. We never want
to see you here again.

How obscene, how unspeakable and murderous
your kind of shame, how helpless
in our pity those of us who might have helped.

—*John Matthias*

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Another autumn

Autumn no longer comes with fire and sword:
I am there in the midst of its endeavours,
Myself a loose leaf hung on a bough.
When shall I fall? It does not matter now
As when impatient youth counted the hours
Or fashionable illusion spoke the word.

Life sprang, and made the spring without our help,
Green as our hope was sure to be deceived
And summer when it came soon dulled to August,
Turning to seed as every summer must.
A life once spent can never be retrieved
Yet there was never year without a whelp.

And so the seasons pass and I, complete,
Fall only to make way for a new bud;
So the world is refreshed till all is done:
A sure and certain hope for everyone,
With quiet for the pounding of the blood,
The world tidied away and all made neat.

—*C. H. Sisson*

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Art

Hip!? Hype!? Hooray!?

by Jed Perl

Georg Baselitz's series of over-life-size carved wood heads, called *Women of Dresden*, made an impressive ensemble at the Pace Gallery on Fifty-seventh Street in October and November. These rough-hewn portraits, which range from three to five feet high and are mounted on tall bases, look like fragmentary remains of the monumental statuary of some ancient civilization. (They're the size of colossal heads from the Roman Imperial period.) The uniform cadmium yellow with which Baselitz has painted the wood was the least likable element in the show; but once I had gotten beyond that lurid tint, I was stirred by Baselitz's taste for bold, no-nonsense forms. If the crudely worked wood brings to mind the German Expressionists of the Teens and Twenties, Baselitz's cautious Cubism, and his sense of female chic, bring to mind the Picasso of the Fifties. Though Baselitz has conceived the heads as free-standing works and given them long, trunklike necks, the faces are rendered in terms of bas-relief. (Picasso's *Woman in a Long Dress*, 1943-44, and *Man with Sheep*, 1944, could have been inspirations.) The planes of the face—the tilt of a cheekbone, the curve of a chin—are often described by a series of cross-hatched cuts. Frequently, Baselitz uses reverse relief, carving a concavity in the wood to suggest the volume of a nose. He gets a movement going with his hatched incisions; he uses the carving tool pictorially, to create a sense of light and color. The eye sockets are carved into the wood, with hatched cuts giving a twinkle to the eye itself. These portraits combine gravity and stillness (the simplicity of the overall form) with quickness and liveliness (the unpredictable carving).

This series of heads is lucid in ways I don't recall Baselitz's work being before. But my impression is that the *Women of Dresden* didn't garner many positive responses. (The second half of Baselitz's show, a series of paintings on wood at the Pace Gallery on Greene Street, was his usual deadly dull everybody-upside-down routine.) Baselitz is one of the most heavily hyped of the newish German Expressionists (he was born in 1938); and even many of the people who felt some excitement about this work a decade or so ago have long since concluded that the energy and soulfulness were false, or at least turned false. I'm not saying that the *Women of Dresden* series is terribly important work; I'm just saying that it's work of some quality. It seems to me to be the first work of Baselitz's in which he's letting the form carry the meaning; thus it's less histrionic than his painting. It's work that might appeal to people who like modernist figurative sculpture: the work of Modigliani or Wilhelm Lehmbruck or Turku Trajan. The irony is that people who have an interest in these artists, whose reputations are rather dusty, will be put off by the Baselitz hype—by the over-designed catalogue, and by the mindless catalogue essay by Thomas McEvilley. (McEvilley, who natters on about form and content, misrepresents Clement Greenberg

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in a manner common today, claiming that Greenberg does not believe that paintings convey emotions or ideas. Perhaps McEvilley has never read Greenberg, who, to give but one example, says of "all-over" painting, "It may speak for a monist naturalism that takes all the world for granted and for which there are no longer either first or last things. . . ." How many anti-formalists know a hundredth of what this particular formalist knows about content?)

The Baselitz we saw at Pace on Fifty-seventh Street wasn't entirely different from the Baselitz of media fame. He's still histrionic, he's still addicted to the Expressionist gesture. But he seems to be trying to express his grandiosity within the terms of the medium. Baselitz began doing sculpture after he turned forty. The literalness of sculpture does him good. Here his gestures have some substance to them. This is work that people of taste might enjoy to some degree, if only they could stop seeing Baselitz as an icon of Neo-Expressionist anti-taste. (But if he weren't an icon he wouldn't be at Pace and perhaps nobody would be looking at all.)

Carroll Dunham's new abstract paintings, at Sonnabend in October, are lyrical and scurrilous. His show presented a working definition of downtown chic, fall 1990. Dunham has actually only been exhibiting paintings on canvas for the past couple of years—he came to prominence in the mid 1980s with paintings on wood veneer—and the side of downtown that is committed to media-based art has been known to accuse Dunham of selling out to Eurocentric hedonism. But Dunham's cartoonish shapes and 1950s pastel colors have been instrumental in bringing baby-boomer nostalgia into art; and Dunham's painterly panache has made him, whether he's working on wood or cardboard or canvas, a downtowner to watch. This trendy aesthete knows how to seduce us. He does what many downtown artists try to do: he creates gorgeous disposable experiences.

Dunham's forms have, in the past, been sneakily erotic: his amoebas and clouds were on the verge of turning into penises and vaginas. Now, in honor of our porn-conscious moment, he's brought the suggestions all the way out: his imagery has gone hard-core. Each of his new paintings (some are wall-sized) focuses on a single complex biomorphic form. What first hits a viewer is the elegance of the color and the paint-handling in and around the form. Dunham is using thinned-out acrylic to create a watercolory veil of strokes. He fills the undulating biomorphic monster critters and the surrounding areas with Fauvish harmonies of purple and green, mauve and orange and red. The colors are unnatural—like the colors of cheap candy and polyester clothes—but Dunham combines his hues with elegance and intelligence: the effect is tacky yet lush. But even as I write these words, I know that I'm taking too long to describe the color. When I walked into the show it was just a few seconds after I'd taken in the color that I saw what was going on with those amoeba forms: the bulges had grown hair and turned into R. Crumb-style testicles, and the penis-shapes were squirting liquids. The painting is sensuous; the subject matter is sensationalist. This is a heady mix of aestheticism (paint for its own sake) and politicization (Dunham dares you to embrace this down and dirty —even scatalogical—pornotopia). I don't think I've ever seen a show that was quite so dazzlingly up-to-the-instant. I do not mean dazzlingly in quotation marks, or ironically. Like it or not, Dunham makes something happen on the canvas. He constructs a very peculiar world from the ground up. These canvases, especially the oversized *Shape with Entrance* (91½" x 158¾"), are the most assured works that Dunham has done so far.

Dunham's show was the occasion for a rapturous review by Peter Schjeldahl, who has just returned to *The Village Voice*, where he was art critic during the downtown heyday of the Eighties. Schjeldahl on Dunham is a marriage made in aestheticism-meets-politicization heaven. After recalling the early Eighties, when "Dunham's art matured" and "summer nights downtown smelled of turpentine and it could seem hard to make a dull painting even on purpose," Schjeldahl

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explains that we're now at a point when painting has ceased "to be a locus of communion and becomes a zone raked by a cross fire of anxieties. Significant painters then have no choice but to take on, as part of their content, the cross fire. Dunham does so with a stylistic twist that in line with current talk of 'high' and 'low' may be termed the New Low: a resurrection of debased models (Funk art of the '60s, Peter Saul, Zap Comix, and subway graffiti are suggested in his case) whose haplessness expresses the pain of devalued personality, even as painting's formal resources, liberated by such candor, flavor the expression with joy." Later on in Schjeldahl's review, Dunham's paintings are said to be "like head-on collisions of Helen Frankenthaler and a toilet-joker." They're also part of "an intermittent local tradition of swan-diving from chilly heights of formalism into warm gutters. (Philip Guston is the tradition's main avatar.)"

I find the image-packed sentences in Schjeldahl's review impressive (nobody else writes likes this), just as I find the snappy transmogrifications in Dunham's paintings impressive (nobody else paints like this). But then I wonder: Isn't that flow of imagery too good to be true? Isn't there something strangely pat and self-satisfied about this writing and this painting that's supposed to come straight out of the hurly-burly? How does the hurly-burly come to be so neat? Are these people too plugged in to their particular hurly-burly? Has with-it become another version of out-of-it? What we're talking about here is the downtown scene. This downtown scene that Dunham paints in and Schjeldahl reports on is characterized by extreme self-consciousness, calculated casualness, style regarded as an idea: it's narcissistic. I confess to being fascinated by downtown narcissism. But narcissism can be an artist's undoing: he can believe that art is nothing but a mirror held up to his stylish soul. It's damn hard for a narcissist to accept the idea that art exists outside of him. (It's that recognition—carried into revelation—that accounts for Proust's being one of the greatest novelists who ever lived.) Dunham's paintings aren't a comment on his narcissism; they are his narcissism. Dunham's paintings say: "We're sexy. We're stylish. We're gorgeous."

McDermott and McGough's last painting show, in 1988, was at the Massimo Audiello Gallery on the fourth floor at 142 Greene Street. Their show in November was at Sperone Westwater, on the second floor of the same building. They may have gone two floors down; but in terms of gallery politics, they've gone a long way up. Audiello is a hot SoHo gallery; Sperone Westwater, which represents Susan Rothenberg and Francesco Clemente, is an international supernova.

McDermott and McGough are one of those art duos who've made their way as much by how they act as by what they produce. (David McDermott was born in 1952, Peter McGough in 1958.) Their shtick is that they want to live in the world of a hundred years ago. Their paintings are often done in a naïve academic manner, as if they were the productions of an eccentric Sunday painter of the Edwardian period. McDermott and McGough underline the retro feeling by double-dating their paintings, with a nineteenth-century as well as a twentieth-century date. In Dadaist fashion, with McDermott and McGough art and life intermesh. For some years they've made the scene dressed in Edwardian garb, complete with top hats. Recently, their home, which has no electricity, has been featured in the decorating magazines. One hears reports of their refusal to take airplanes. They do, however, use the telephone and allow their gallery to produce color slides and transparencies of their work: craziness cannot eclipse careerism. It's not entirely clear to what extent they're really bats, to what extent they're crazy like foxes. (I once spent a couple of hours with them, and the only thing I was sure of was that if I didn't leave their studio soon, I'd go nuts.) But then craziness has always been an element in art life; and perhaps in this instance even the crazies themselves don't know to what extent they're in or out of control.

My own feeling, based on the work in the

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recent show, is that McDermott and McGough are about half put-on artists, about half authentic visionary loonies. McDermott and McGough's authentic gift is for paintings that are kooky conceits, and there are maybe four of them in the Sperone Westwater show. That, however, wasn't enough to fill this gallery, so the show was padded out, and a lot of the stuff was worse than perfunctory. The biggest painting in the show, *When Touring the Louvre American Soldiers Attract Considerable Attention By Being Handsome 1904*, is a whole lot of nothing. This huge canvas contains cutouts that hold reproductions of masterpieces, including Caravaggio's *Bacchus*; and figures drawn in a turn-of-the-century-magazine style who all stare at the American soldier, a boy version of a Gibson Girl. The painting is trendy hash: there's the gosh-golly-gee homoeroticism; the Schnabelesque quotations from the Old Masters; the red-blue-yellow color scheme and some perfunctory cross-hatching in black that rehash various kinds of Jasper Johns paintings. A painting called *San Francisco Earthquake Souvenirs 1906* is a rather conventional still life rendered in an insecure academic manner. Another painting is just an anthology of guys with Arrow-shirt-advertisement good looks. In the middle of the larger gallery at Sperone there were some Dadaist doodads: a series of glass cases, each of which held a souvenir of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake—broken crockery and the like.

The best painting of the show was *Herald Square July 1936, 1926, 1916, 1906.* Over what at first looks like a rather naïve bird's-eye rendering of a crowded city square, the artists have superimposed a thick red line that angles in upon itself, creating a maze-like configuration. The various turns and twists in the maze are labeled 1906, 1916, 1926, 1936; and as you look at the painting, which is done in clear, posterish colors, you realize that while the various sections of the labyrinth flow one into the other, the styles of dress, the kinds of vehicles, the very pavement of the street change from area to area. It's as if the Herald Squares of four different decades had been grafted onto one another. The painting is a visualization of McDermott and McGough's idea that it is possible to live in several periods simultaneously. *Herald Square* creates the mildly weird sensation of traveling through time that we have when we read certain classic children's books, or watch old episodes of "The Twilight Zone." The look of the painting recalls the blunt directness of a chart on the wall of a schoolroom; it's a haywire chart, and studying it awakens the eerie feeling we all have had when we wonder how different periods relate. The other day my son, who's eight, said to me: "I feel creepy when I read about dinosaurs. I feel better when the mammals appear, because I'm a mammal." McDermott and McGough's Herald Square paintings raises the question: Where do we fit in? All the stronger works in the show were about then and now. *Splendid Achievements, Part II* contains miniature reproductions of earlier McDermott and McGough paintings on the left, and, on the right, the artists' names spelled out in twigs that hang over a Florida marsh full of water lilies, butterflies, and birds. It's a winning cross between the idea of the Duchamp valise—which contained miniatures of his life work—and the craft productions of some nutty Victorian hobbyist. I also like the Phrenology paintings. In *Chart 5. 1904*, above the lettering that reads "He loved boys, artists, and aristocrats," looms a huge, brightly colored phrenological head, on which the various areas are inscribed not with mental states, but with the names of the boys in this man's boy-obsessed life. Some boys fill only a year; others a decade or more. It's McDermott and McGough's version of *The Other Victorians*; it's also a fantasy about the world before AIDS.

If all this sounds slight, it is. I will only insist that some of it is genuine in its slightness. After that, you come to the inflated reputation. Warholism is responsible for that. And to imagine a contemporary art scene without Warholism is as hard as imagining the world of McDermott and McGough's *Primeval Perambulation 1867*, in which the dinosaurs and the Victorians live in happy harmony.

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Theater

Circles

by Donald Lyons

The tale of the Chalk Circle is an old one and has had many lives. This property (to use a word that appropriately blends echoes of Marxism and show business) first took dramatic form as a play by Li Hsing Tao in the thirteenth-century Yuan-dynasty Golden Age of Chinese drama that told of a wise judge (many classic Chinese plays dealt with the reforming activities of heroic, itinerant judges) awarding a disputed child to the woman less willing to wrench it out of a chalk circle drawn on the ground. In the Yuan play the child was thus given to its true biological mother. In Weimar Germany a playwright who called himself simply Klabund told a garbled version of the story in his play *Chalk Circle*, which starred Elisabeth Bergner in Berlin and Anna May Wong in London.

We then move forward to New York in February 1944. The film star Luise Rainer, an Austrian, mentioned the Klabund play to Bertolt Brecht as a possible vehicle for herself on Broadway—in, that is, an adaptation by Brecht. Rainer's most celebrated role in film was O-Lan, the steadfast Chinese peasant wife in Pearl Buck's kitsch epic *The Good Earth*, a 1937 movie antedating by two years, incidentally, Brecht's writing of the not wholly dissimilar *Mother Courage*. Brecht was eager for a Broadway hit, his vaunted contempt for the commercial theater notwithstanding; he boasted to Rainer (just possibly correctly) that it was he who had suggested the adaptation to Klabund in 1925; he started work on his own version in New York. He returned in March to his American "home base" in the Hollywood beach exurb of Santa Monica and completed *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* there on June 5, 1944. But by this time the Solomonic tale of a sweetly suffering mother had been Brechtified, partially drained of pathos, and rendered doubly unattractive to the film star by the fact that the play's second half was dominated by a lovably corrupt judge called Azdak (Brecht's predictable variant on the heroic Yuan figure). The contemplated Broadway production never occurred; the English-language premiere of the only major Brecht work written wholly in America took place at a small college in Minnesota in May 1948 in a translation by Eric and Maja Bentley. And it was not until June 1954 that Brecht himself, now in charge of the Berliner Ensemble in the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm in East Berlin, gave the play its first German staging, with music by Paul Dessau; it was the first new production in the building. And now in late 1990—the year of the demise of "East" Berlin—the Public Theater has put on a thoroughly musicalized version of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* set in the Caribbean.

It is relevant to ask, before examining the Caribbean *Chalk Circle*, how the prefix "Caucasian" got attached to Brecht's version. It was in fact a typical specimen of Brechtian impudence-*cum*-cowardice. He had written a prologue to the play, set in 1944 in the Caucasus, in which two Soviet col-

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lectives, having stalwartly driven the Nazis from the valley, fall to quarreling over which collective, that of the goat-herders or that of the fruit-growers, should receive use of the land. The matter is submitted to a visiting playwriting collective, led by a Storyteller (he enters "led by girl tractorist. He is a well-built man of simple manners . . ."). This Storyteller tells the collectives the "ancient Caucasian" parable of the Chalk Circle. This agitprop prologue, while rarely performed (it was omitted at the Public), is characteristic of the coarsely threatening didacticism that went so smoothly with Brecht's malevolent cunning. Now "Caucasian" is, of course, the name of nothing but a mountain range; what Brecht wanted, but, with an eye on Broadway, did not dare to say was "Georgian." He wanted to salute the homeland of Stalin, unseen tutelary spirit of the play. Covert laudatory allusions to Stalin do occur in the play's songs; characters are given recognizably Georgian surnames. Thus, while *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* was neither the first nor the last homage to Stalin concocted in Hollywood and its adjacent luxury bedroom communities, it seems to have proved the most enduring.

But, for all the perverseness of its implied dedication, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is one of Brecht's more appealing theater pieces. Brecht was a tricky character; slippery was his soul. His very fear of the sentimentality inherent in the story and in himself drove him to fight against it by formal device after formal device, many taken from the Chinese theater: masks, instrumental music, narrative and lyric songs, a moralizing narrator bridging the action and vocalizing characters' thoughts, puppets describing some of the adventures, stylized dance movements sketching, so to speak, ideograms rather than enactments of feeling and behavior. All this works well to undercut and enliven a potentially lachrymose saga. So also does Brecht's bottomless capacity for limning the meannesses and cruelties of human nature. A Brecht script often resembles a D. W. Griffith movie rewritten by W. C. Fields; the Fields titles *Never Give a Sucker an Even Break* and *You Can't Cheat an Honest Man* would be right at home on a Brecht title page.

In the play's first half, the servant girl Grusha undergoes an odyssey of travel and suffering and joy: during a bloody palace revolution she gets engaged, rescues the Governor's little son from an uncaring mother and from murderous revolutionaries, takes it up to the mountains, knocks out a pursuing guard, begs milk, crosses a rope bridge over a gorge, is rejected by her fastidious bourgeois family, and is wed to a brutal malingerer. The writer's inventive alternation of sweet and sour in these perils of Grusha keeps the tale lively. His hand works happily on the sour; the rancorous caricatures of the "wicked" come in such abundance that one is sometimes put in mind, for all the obvious differences, of certain French writers of Jansenist tendency like Mauriac or Bernanos who like to set a moral simpleton loose in a gray pool of sharks. (Flannery O'Connor is such another.)

But the good never quite drown in Brecht. The Griffith in him wanted a place for goodness even in this "fallen" world, but he kept insisting on strewing the ground around it with banana peels. Look at what this rotten system does to this sweet thing and—aha!—here's another painful fall the dear is about to take. "Terrible is the temptation to do good," the Storyteller warns Grusha about to save the baby. But it is on just this act of selfless goodness (and on another, when Azdak saves the life of the hunted Grand Duke) that the play turns. Azdak himself incarnates the Brechtian dichotomy of savior/rascal. He is a souse, an eater of bribes, a pincher of bottoms, a vainglorious boaster (sound like a well-known playwright?), but his judicial verdicts favor the poor and he ends by adjudicating with moral correctness the fate of Grusha as mother (in a typical demythologizing revision, it is the nurturer who gets the child over the merely biological mother) and as wife (her dismayed fiancé has returned from the war to find her a wife and a mother). Azdak, besides being a

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demythologized Yuan-era judge, is meant for a courtroom Robin Hood, a life- and laughter-loving Lord of Misrule whose corrupt, crooked, and disorderly ways produce more real justice than the rich-leaning official system. But for the character of Azdak to succeed would have taken a more nuanced and exuberant vein of comic fantasy than Brecht possessed. Brecht's complex characters—Galileo and Courage, for example—are not comic.

In many ways, then, the Chinese screens of the Chalk Circle provided Brecht the puppeteer with a welcome apparatus to hide behind and manipulate. What did the Public do with this Chinese/Caucasian/Caribbean menu? Adapter Thulani Davis, using the translation of William R. Spiegelberger, set the story on the imaginary Antillean island of "Gonave," a francophone society combining elements of Haiti, Guadeloupe, and (predictably, since no Public Theater production would feel complete without an anti-American reference or two) Grenada. The adaptation kept a linear closeness to Brecht, imposing a superficial layering of nomenclature (Grand Blanc for Grand Duke, for example), patois, and "Frannsh pro-nun-see-ah-see-own" (this last is a familiar, Hollywood-esque misstep made in stories where people who would not naturally be speaking English have to do so). But the language worked well enough to forward the narrative, that bare hanger upon which the razzle-dazzle of excited theatrical craftsmanship was draped. *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* was the Public Theater at its best. A cadre of talented artists, largely black—director George C. Wolfe, choreographer Hope Clarke, composer Kweyao Agyapon (he played throughout on stage with another percussionist and a guitarist), costumer Toni-Leslie James, set designer Loy Arcenas, mask and puppet designers Barbara Pollitt and Stephen Kaplin—transformed the fable into a musical rife with menace, surprise, and tenderness. The ferocious stylizations worked: the uprising a savagely formal spectacle; the decapitated Governor a painted pole; the cruel Governess in a tapered pharaonic headdress; the Herod-like pursuing soldiery chillingly choreographed; the daredevil gorge-crossing movingly enacted by backlit puppets; the very child a doll. In general, the *more* stylized and abstract it was, the better it played.

Dominating the stage was Storyteller Novella Nelson, whose forcefulness of personality, phrasing, and intellect eschewed hectoring belligerence and kept one's sympathies alert. A woman as managerial raisonneur felt right in the evoked Caribbean milieu (but leave it to the Public to overdo a trendy thing: later in the play women with painted beards were distractingly cast as male cops). Charlayne Woodard as Grusha showed the sensibleness and practicality of goodness. Aware of the pitfalls of pathos and of miserabilism, she made the character fresh by the vigor of her own corporeality. Kevin Jackson played her suitor-fiancé, the soldier Simon, and matched Miss Woodard in appeal. In fact, the play's best moments involved these two: their bumptious courtship (like something out of *Our Town*); their shyly sensual mating dance in a solitary circle of light, as they delicately just kept from touching; their later dance of recognition and reunion. These superb players used the Caribbean rhythms and movements to flesh out the somewhat arid I-say-you-a-folk-proverb-and-you-say-me-one-back ping-pong paroemiography of the written dialogue. Also excellent was the towering Sharon Washington as the Imelda-like Governor's wife and as the nasty sister-in-law (like the rest of the supporting cast, she took several roles).

The second half of the play, the Azdak part, was tedious and strained, and that for a number of reasons. The script becomes more expository and prolix; incidents are remembered more than (in any way) enacted; the whole career of Azdak is more a conceit than a dramatic reality (I do not mean a *naturalistically* dramatic reality necessarily). The role, far from being one of Brecht's triumphs, seems to me, as I said, a failure. Add to these inherent problems the discomfort of Reggie Montgomery, the actor playing

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Azdak, with the role's didactic rhetoric, with its demands that Azdak impersonate various aristocrats, and with its laborious and repetitious physical comedy shtick. As a result, the Azdak scenes generally—a few moments in the courtroom with a doctor and with a bimbo excepted—sounded like someone lecturing on the theory of humor rather than telling jokes; they were lead.

But the staging rebounded at the very end as Azdak wrapped up a happy end for Grusha and Simon and the child. Grusha's last words were: "I took [the baby] on the Easter Sunday I got engaged to you. And so he's a child of love. Let's dance." And they do, irresistibly and with a joy not beholden to ideological correctness. How much that succeeds in this version of the play fell under the rubric of music and dance! In 1944, Brecht poured his astringencies and his softnesses into the mold of the old Chinese fairy tale. The formal mechanisms of Chinese theater protected his sensibility well. But, even in his eyes, the music was never right; Paul Dessau's work did not satisfy Brecht. *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* seems indeed to have been a play in search of just the type of musicalization it got at the Public. Some highly sophisticated black artists have, like Brecht with the Yuan play, expressed their sensibilities in the mode of a pseudo-primitive "Caribbean" folk musical. There were, to be sure, losses: whenever the script rose to dialectical articulateness about war profiteers and the endless screwing of the poor by the rich, these points, occasionally pungent but never novel, tended to get smothered in the vibrantly patterned energies on stage. Small loss, perhaps, especially in light of the cheerful gains achieved at the Public in liveliness and in human animation.

Does Brecht, then, at this hour of the mortal agonies of his beloved Stalinism, look like a great playwright hobbled by some grotesque allegiances? He is perhaps rather emerging as the Ezra Pound of the Left, a touching lyric poet with a nauseating and well-paid penchant for a bloodthirsty tyranny. As a playwright, he proved a respectable pupil of Schiller and Kleist by dint of writing a few cheekily revisionist "historical" plays (*Galileo*, *Mother Courage*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*), but he does not approximate, for me, the moral stature of modern masters like Chekhov. He seems rather to combine the gifts of a dramaturge in the manner of Meyerhold or Piscator or Craig with those of a facile librettist like Cocteau. (It was precisely as a libretto that the Public used his text. And it is very much to the point that Brecht's only real popular success was as the librettist-adapter of Kurt Weill's 1928 *Threepenny Opera*, a much overrated piece.) All his rhetorical rigamarole of "epic theater" and "alienation" and "distancing," though perhaps sanitary in the heyday of naturalism, now seems like much ado about little—not bluff exactly, but the nervous and defensive patter of a deft magician eager to distract attention from . . . what? From his guilts and feelings? From his abashed yearning for the good, which he obscurely, in some cranny of the soul, intuited not to be present in the ideology he so stubbornly clasped as a shield against the light?

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Music

Whiling away the hours

by Dana Mack

At a time when music promoters everywhere are toying with the conventions of the concert series in hopes of increasing box-office business, it should come as no surprise that the Metropolitan Museum of Art also wants into the act. This past fall the museum inaugurated its "Music for a While" series, nine hour-long concerts scheduled for Fridays at 7:00 in the Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium. These have been zealously marketed by the museum's concert-and-lecture administration as a concertgoing opportunity for almost everyone—from those who "wish to experience a variety of museum activities" to those who may be "loath to commit a whole evening" to music. The concert-and-lecture brochure distributed last summer suggested that listeners combine this musical interlude "with a visit to the Museum's exhibitions or an early supper."

In the context of the Met's expanded weekend-evening hours, the advertising pitch might deceive. For working people at all interested in art, there perhaps would be time for a hurried dinner before or after such a musical event, but certainly no time to browse in the collections. (With only a half hour to forty minutes—the museum closes its doors at 8:45—one hardly has time to run, much less walk, through an exhibition).

Despite the fact that Program Administrator Hilde Limondjian (quoted in a *New York Times* article of October 19) has promised her prospective audience a total break with traditional concert formats, the series offers no such thing. What it represents is nothing more than a twist on the flexible and ever-popular "brown-bag" concert. Only the setting has changed. Instead of a public gathering place to which people have free and informal accesss—a park, a shopping center, or an office-building atrium—the Met series takes place in the closed hall of an exalted cultural institution; the cost of a single ticket is ten dollars.

What could be wrong with taking the "noon concert" and serving it up at 7:00 as a kind of musical high tea? At least three things, all of which seem to be presumptions of the series' organizers. First, that the museum is the kind of institution where things happen fast and perfunctorily; second, that the Met is a *gemütlich* place where one can sample the fruits of the spirit before moving up the grand staircase to sandwiches and pastries; third, that today's music audience is capricious enough to be sold an evening series on the basis of its brevity and the promise of other entertainments. Worst of all is the implication that with this series of short concerts, the Met administration has thought chiefly to produce yet another basket into which its more casual visitors may drop money as they wander in or out of the galleries—or to and from the museum restaurant.

Considering the unassuming reputations of the performing artists and the unusual programming, interest in the series has so far been encouraging, but probably not by the

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standards of the management, nor for the reasons the management anticipated. For the four initial concerts, advance ticket sales, generally ranging between 250 and 350 tickets, far outnumbered door sales, which indicates that the audience for these performances—many of which feature modern music—is a small but knowledgeable one, surely in possession of a full evening's worth of *Sitzfleisch*. The Metropolitan Museum's music audience has been, historically, a genteel one, often stingy with its applause. The modest crowds at these mini-concerts seemed no exception, except where they appeared to have been padded by the performing artists' friends.

But whether any lasting public interest in the series can be sustained is an open question. Attendance at the third and fourth concerts diminished—a sure sign of the audience's critical judgment. For not one of the four events that took place between October 19 and November 16 left the listener aching to hear more than the bare hour's worth allotted. Rather the opposite.

The recital by 1979 Naumburg competition winner Peter Orth that opened the series was not the worst of the lot—but it was the most nerve-wracking. Orth was featured playing the G-major Sonata of Schubert, opus 78, and the Prokofiev Seventh Sonata, two works that, respectively, impose perhaps every demand that can be made upon a pianist's musical and technical resources.

To his credit, Orth quite obviously aspires to sensitivity. This is a quality all too rare today, but one which must be accompanied by a certain technical conviction, and a healthy dose of good taste. Unfortunately, owing to his gingerly touch and his tendency to squeeze the melody out of phrases, Orth's playing has a plaintively anemic, dilettantish quality. Orth's playing of the first theme of the Schubert, for example, possessed the requisite *pianissimo* dynamic, yet the music seemed somehow trapped in its shell. Indeed, that magnificent emergence that so characterizes this movement, especially on the entrance of the second theme, was missing; it was coddled and soporific throughout. And Orth's tendency, in all four movements, to belabor melodic line and to select slow *tempi* emasculated the work as a whole.

The late Schubert sonatas are technically awkward and difficult to sustain musically; they are counted among the most challenging works in the repertory. One might have expected a bit more of the Prokofiev sonata, however; it is technically more difficult than the Schubert, but is musically straightforward. Here the pianist displayed a peculiar approach to pedal. He used too much of it where articulation should have been dry and clear, as in the tense opening phrase of the Seventh Sonata. Yet in the *Andante caloroso* he was so sparing in pedal as to rob this second movement's lush harmonies of their warmth.

But Orth's principal problem in bringing off the Prokofiev was his tendency, again, to play too slowly—or rather, to play only fast enough to suggest that he was working slightly beyond his physical capabilities. The third movement—the syncopated *Precipitato* which Horowitz's train-speed recording catapulted to fame—was so carefully executed as to render it in danger of stalling. For a work composed on the eve of World War II, and so clearly influenced by the relentless machinery and chaotic sentiments of war, far more forward drive is required.

It was perhaps owing to her recklessness in programming that soprano Lydia Mila's October 26 recital of Mozart, Bellini, and Richard Strauss offered the disappointments it did. Mila is apparently schooled in coloratura as well as bel canto, but her coloratura technique proved on this evening far from fluid and secure. In Mozart's concert aria "*Mia speranza adorata*" ("My beloved hope") the more florid passages sounded squeezed.

In six Bellini *ariette*, Mila was more at home. The first of these, entitled "*Malinconia, Ninfa gentile*" ("Mencholy, gentle spirit"), was especially lovely, and the singer here displayed a congenial voice. But Mila had a strange propensity, in all her selections,

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to speed up at the beginning of phrases and slow down toward their end. This habit quickly tired the ear.

The concluding selection of five Richard Strauss *Lieder* (from opus 19, opus 68, and opus 69) proved truly unfortunate. Rhythmically square, naïvely sentimental, and wholly lacking in whimsy, Mila's performance of these songs rendered them unrecognizable as products of the composer. Mila has sung at least three Strauss roles—including the demanding one of Zerbinetta, for which she is Erie Mill's understudy at City Opera. But at least here she seemed unaware of the essential hardness at the core of Strauss's world-weary women, a hardness that certainly must also inform such songs as the opus 68 "Amor."

The November 9 New York debut of the Brodsky String quartet—the quartet-in-residence at Cambridge University from 1985 to 1989—offered some of the more fulfilling moments of the series so far. A performance of Lutoslawski's String Quartet (1964), which began the program, had some elegance and a fluid coherence. Violinists Michael Thomas and Ian Belton, violist Paul Cassidy, and cellist Jacqueline Thomas seem especially well disposed to Lutoslawski's easygoing experiment in thematic play and gentle *Geräuschmusik* (noise music). But their playing is so clearly of the non-aggressive school as to be discomfiting; though they took the Shostakovich Ninth String Quartet as earnestly as they did the Lutoslawski, the Shostakovich suffered more than a little from the performers' self-possession and unflappable tranquility. One could not help thinking that this ensemble, which boasts outfitting by designer by Issey Miyake, plays as much on its cool as on its instruments.

Perhaps the oddest thing about Isaac Stern Award winner Mark Peskanov's recital of November 16 was the program's lack of substance. With the exception of Mozart's B-flat major Sonata, K.378, the selections would all have been fitting encores to a full-length concert. Of some interest were a rarely performed Scherzo *Sonatensatz* of Brahms (an early work composed in tribute to Joseph Joachim) and Peskanov's own *Circle* for violin, voice, and keyboard, composed recently in collaboration with soprano Deborge Pinnington, and here performed with her. The latter, a prayer for peace among nations adapted from the Sixty-seventh Psalm, sounded like an endlessly repeated American Indian chant followed by an endlessly repeated Jewish chant (to which the Hebrew text was sung) and concluded by a reprise of the endlessly repeated American Indian chant.

Consistent with the rather hollow serenity informing his interpretation of Mozart, Brahms, and Peskanov-Pinnington was the violinist's approach to the virtuoso pieces which closed the program. Some in the audience admired the dispassionate equilibrium Peskanov displayed while executing some of the wickedest passages in the violin repertoire—as conceived by Kreisler and Sarasate. (These included the latter's *Zigeunerweisen*.) But the impression made upon me was so coldly facile as to be horrific.

At this point one is obliged to ask whether the disenchantments documented above should be of special significance to the New York music public. Should the Met's series of hour-long concerts assume importance beyond that of any other venture committed to the sponsorship of lesser-known concert artists? The answer, of course, is no. The "Music for a While" series, like any concert series, will stand or fall not on its admission price, its convenience to a major museum collection, or the length of its concert programs. It will do so on the quality of musical performance alone. And this despite every attempt of the Met's publicity office to convince us otherwise.

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Books

Portrait of a generation

by Norman Podhoretz

For better or worse, there is no American counterpart to Noel Annan: a professor turned academic administrator who moves back and forth between the campus and the world of public affairs; a historian of ideas with a real knack (on display in this country from time to time in *The New York Review of Books*) for intellectual journalism; an inveterate sitter on boards and committees and commissions; a member in good standing of fashionable society who knows all the gossip worth knowing, and much that isn't, about everyone in virtually every field of endeavor. To get some sense of his position within British culture, one has to imagine a combination of McGeorge Bundy, Jacques Barzun, Father Theodore Hesburgh, and Truman Capote.

In short, Lord (of course: what else would he be but a life peer?) Annan is the quintessential Establishment figure, and the reason we cannot look upon his like in this country is that, for all the loose talk about an American Establishment, there is no such thing here. It is also possible that England will never look upon his like again. Indeed, Annan seems to see himself and his contemporaries as a dying breed. He calls them "Our Age," meaning everyone who went to Oxford, Cambridge, or the London School of Economics "between 1919, the end of the Great War, and . . . 1951, the last year in which those who had served in the armed forces during the Second World War returned to study." His new book [1] is offered as a portrait of that generation, smack into the middle of which he, now in his early seventies, was born, and with almost every member of which he seems to have been personally acquainted.

Yet *Our Age* is not a portrait in the usual sense. To be sure, it contains a fair number of thumbnail sketches of key characters and a generous spicing of anecdotes. But what Annan mainly provides here is a chatty and highly informal history of the ideas and attitudes that shaped and then animated his own generation of academics, intellectuals, and politicians. The story begins with the efforts of that generation—which were to prove so successful in so many ways—to turn England into a more egalitarian, more tolerant, and less philistine society than it was in the days of their fathers and grandfathers, and it ends elegiacally with the rejection of "our vision of life" in the England of Margaret Thatcher.

In telling this story, Annan exhibits a breathtaking mastery of subjects ranging from the arts to philosophy to science to economics to politics to public administration. Equally impressive is his ability to digest and summarize all this material. There are, however, limits to Annan's expository skills, and they emerge in sharp focus when we compare *Our Age* to Paul Johnson's *Modern Times*, a book covering much the same period though not confined to England.

1 *Our Age: Portrait of a Generation*, by Noel Annan; Weidenfeld & Nicolson (London), 470 pages, £20.

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Unlike Johnson, the lucidity of whose prose never dims, not for a page, not for a paragraph, not for a sentence, not for a phrase, Annan is often so allusive that following him becomes almost impossible. Unlike Johnson, too, Annan is afflicted with the maddening English vice (the real *vice anglais*) of cozy insularity. People of whom one has never heard are called in *Our Age* by their surnames or, worse still, by their schoolboy nicknames, and not further identified; events are casually referred to without being explained; and most irritating of all, English slang, some of it also deriving from schoolboy days and much of it totally unintelligible to an American reader, keeps popping up among the flowery metaphors to which the book is in any case excessively given.

To mention Paul Johnson is to become aware of yet another limit to Annan's considerable abilities—this one in the realm of substance rather than style. For Johnson, whose existence is recognized here only in a couple of cameo appearances, is among the very few members of "Our Age" about whom Annan can scarcely find a good word to say. Toward almost everyone else, he is relentlessly fair, fair almost to a fault. Always he makes a great point of seeing every side of every issue and in being ready to grant the element of truth in any position with which he disagrees. Even in dealing with F. R. Leavis, whom he detests as a man and disapproves of as a literary critic, Annan is capable of recognizing and acknowledging a great achievement.[2] But where Paul Johnson is concerned, he is not only uncharacteristically venomous but ridiculous in dismissing the author of such contemporary classics as *Modern Times* and *A History of the Jews* as a mere "publicist."

What bothers Annan, I suspect, is not that Johnson is a conservative—or, as Annan prefers to describe him, "a paladin of the crusading knights of the right in the eighties." After all, Annan is capable of expressing a high regard for such conservatives as Evelyn Waugh and Michael Oakeshott (who, together with Leavis, he sees as the three main "deviants" of "Our Age"). Nor does he have any trouble praising a number of conservative politicians, including even Margaret Thatcher. But in contrast to Waugh and Oakeshott, Johnson is a neoconservative—that is, a former leftist who has converted to conservatism—and apostasy of that kind is simply beyond the range of a tolerance that Annan easily extends to aristocratic ladies like Unity Mitford, who admired Hitler, and her sister Jessica Mitford (referred to, naturally, as "Decca"), who admired Stalin, and, for that matter, to Soviet agents like Guy Burgess and Kim Philby. Annan by no means justifies these people, and he can even wax indignant at moments in talking, in one of his most interesting chapters, about the Cambridge spies. But they certainly seem to make him less angry than Paul Johnson does.

If Johnson represents for Annan the very worst of "Our Age," the very best is embodied for him in Isaiah Berlin, everyone's favorite Oxford sage. Of Berlin he writes: ". . . even when set against the most dedicated and pure socialists of Our Age, he seems to me to have written the truest and the most moving of all interpretations of life that my own generation made." Now leaving aside the amazing tribute here to the socialists—and it is all the more amazing in

2 The same cannot be said for Leavis in relation to Annan. When I was an undergraduate at Cambridge in the early Fifties, I first studied under Leavis, and later did graduate work under Annan, who was then a young don. Knowing that Leavis saw Annan as a latter-day acolyte of the Bloomsbury circle—which stood for everything that Leavis regarded as pernicious in British culture—I nevertheless kept hoping that I would be able to make him see that Annan was different and better. My chance, or so I imagined, came with a favorable review by Annan of a new book by Leavis. "Did you see Noel Annan's piece about you?" I foolishly asked him one day. "Yes," he replied without missing a beat, "the rats are always the first to desert the sinking ship." Annan's harshness toward Leavis in *Our Age* is thus mild compared to what he would be entitled to feel, and his generosity is all the more extraordinary.

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that it omits any trace whatsoever of the awareness shown elsewhere in the book of the great damage they did to the economy and the educational system of his country—there is something wildly out of proportion in this rapturous canonization of Isaiah Berlin.

Granted that Berlin can be an infinitely charming and amusing companion; granted that he is a brilliant conversationalist and a virtuoso lecturer (a very Paganini of ideas, as Oakeshott once wickedly called him); granted that he has written a number of stimulating essays about the minor thinkers (Herder, Herzen, de Maistre, etc.) to whom he seems so strongly drawn; granted that he has to his credit the authorship of the useful distinction between the hedgehog and the fox. Granted all that, the fact remains that Berlin has neither an original mind nor even a particularly unconventional one; and if the English philosopher Roger Scruton goes too far in characterizing him as shallow, Scruton is entirely justified in attacking this famous defender of liberty for maintaining a discreet silence since liberty has come under assault in the universities from the Left and for failing to take on such "polluters" of scholarship as the Marxist historians E. J. Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, and E. H. Carr.

Citing these charges by Scruton, Annan evidently considers them so absurd that he never deigns to offer an answer. Or perhaps he refuses to answer not because he thinks Scruton's attack on Berlin's failure "to stand up and be counted" in the fight against the leftist threat to intellectual freedom is self-evidently wrong but because he knows there is no answer. In that case his inflated estimate of Berlin becomes not only intellectually but also morally hollow.

And here we come to the most important difference between, on the one side, Annan and the people of his own generation he admires and resembles and, on the other side, neoconservatives like Paul Johnson. In the beginning all of them were certain that they knew what was wrong with England: the society was class-ridden, the economy was unfair, the culture was repressive. In the beginning, too, all of them were certain that they knew what the solutions were: some form of socialism ("fair shares") combined with a revamped system of education, greater public support for the arts, and a liberalization of the laws and mores governing sexual conduct, especially homosexuality and abortion. And finally, all of them lived to become disillusioned with at least some of these confidently offered solutions as they worked themselves out in practice. Annan himself even goes so far as to speak of "reaping the whirlwind" in the shape of increased crime, violence, drugs, and promiscuity, and to raise the question of whether "Our Age" was to blame for the economic decline of Britain in the pre-Thatcher period.

Discussing these painful issues, moreover, Annan is prepared to accept a share of responsibility on behalf of his own generation and its ideas. (In this, incidentally, he is far more honest, and honorable, than most American liberals have been in similar circumstances: can one imagine Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. or John Kenneth Galbraith admitting that liberalism may have had some connection with the social pathologies which have been afflicting us since the late Sixties?) Nevertheless, the share of responsibility Annan is willing to acknowledge is not nearly big enough to force him into asking whether something may have been radically wrong with the assumptions on the basis of which actions were taken whose consequences he dislikes and deplores. And this is precisely where he and his friends part company with Paul Johnson and his fellow neoconservatives, who have had the intellectual and moral courage to rethink those assumptions in the light of their ugly practical consequences.

Lacking that degree of courage, *Our Age*, for all its fair-minded openness to opposing views, remains in the deepest sense uncritical of its own—so much so that in the end it leaves one feeling that England may be better off with the passing of the generation of which Annan offers this ultimately self-regarding and complacent portrait.

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Weimar's absent father

Golo Mann Reminiscences and Reflections: A Youth in Germany. Translated from the German by Krishna Winston. Norton, 338 pages, $25

reviewed by Harold James

Weimar Germany has always exercised a fascination over the outside observer: from Christopher Isherwood's *I Am a Camera* and *Goodbye to Berlin* to the recent Tommy Tune Broadway hit version of the old classic *Grand Hotel.* It offers a stark and sick exaggeration of the dilemmas of modernity: the avant avant-garde of the culture, the abrupt changes in morality, the political reformism, the first highly developed welfare state. And in addition there is the poignance of imminent doom, a kind of appeal of the *Titanic.* Viewed from the political watershed of 1933, Weimar presents a grim warning. The result is that it can easily be sentimentalized, or turned into a facile political lesson (or indeed both at the same time). In his memoirs, Golo Mann avoids these dangers of Weimartology.

Weimar also attracted some notable studies by insiders. These were men and women who circulated widely in the interlocking cultural, artistic, political, and economic elites. One of the finest—and certainly the most wide-ranging—set of literary memoirs of this century is the autobiography of Count Harry Kessler. Kessler was widely believed to be an illegitimate son, begot in high old age, of the first German Kaiser, Wilhelm I, who certainly gave the Count his title. By a curious coincidence, the greatest political memoirist of the inside workings of the last days of German democracy, John Wheeler-Bennett, owed his spectacular social success among the inner circles of Prussian-German aristocratic life to his physical resemblance to Kaiser Wilhelm II and to the rumor that he also was the illegitimate offspring of the Hohenzollern dynasty.

Golo Mann is—to continue with Peter Gay's terminology of Weimar style—half outsider and half insider. An outsider in that he was very young: born in 1909, he grew up through adolescence and student years in Weimar. An insider in that he is the offspring of the German literary equivalent of the Hohenzollerns, the writing dynasty of Manns. He is the second son of Thomas Mann: but while his older brother and sister, Klaus and Erika, could swim in the Weimar maelstrom, Golo had to look up to them and learn from their experiences. As a child he became interested in history, and was to become a distinguished historian, author of a masterly biography of Wallenstein as well as of a general survey of modern German history.

In his new book, *Reminiscences and Reflections*, Mann gives an intimate account of Weimar that explores areas more unfamiliar to the modern reader than the well-worn stereotypes of urban glitter and decadence: Berlin figures less prominently than Munich, the town less than the countryside, and the avant-garde less than literary tradition and scholastic institutions.

Like Kessler or Wheeler-Bennett, Golo Mann has a father problem. This will not surprise readers of Thomas Mann's diaries, which stand as a grim testament to the novelist's cold-blooded and self-analytical remoteness from his family. The son spares us none of the details. Thomas Mann, at the height of his literary powers and success, engaged on *The Magic Mountain*, is an austere figure cloistered from his immediate surroundings. "Children like to make noise. We almost always had to keep quiet: in the morning because our father was working, in the afternoon because he first read, then napped, and toward evening, because he was again occupied with serious matters. And there would be a terrible outburst if we disturbed him, all the more hurtful because we almost never provoked him intentionally. At meals we also usually kept silent . . ."

Later, despite the coldness and the distance, Golo Mann made his mission the public representation of his father. It is a role that demanded the suppression of his own

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personality. As a Heidelberg student in the early 1930s, he vigorously defended the paternal pro-republicanism and the opposition to the rising wave of Nazism. "Thomas Mann," he wrote then in a polemic in the student newspaper, "has such intimate ties to all the great Germans of the past, and cultivates those ties so consciously; he considers himself entrusted with preserving the great German heritage. . . . The problems around which all his work revolves are specifically and essentially those of the German mind." What a role for a young man to impose on himself: interpreter of the interpreter of the German tradition! The father's influence was still crippling, and in the memoirs Golo admits that he could not function creatively until after the death of his father and the suicide of his highly gifted older brother Klaus.

In the early 1920s, during the upheavals of the German hyper-inflation, Golo Mann's mother sent him as an escape from the oppression of parental tyranny to the new and experimental school run by Kurt Hahn in Salem, on the gentle slopes surrounding Lake Constance. Hahn became a replacement father figure, though still a very distant and unaccommodating one. He was only slightly less remote than Thomas Mann. Shaken by his political experience of the war in the German Foreign Office and as a close friend and adviser to Prince Max of Baden, the Kaiser's last Chancellor and the exponent of democratization and negotiation with Woodrow Wilson, Hahn turned to an educational ideal: to the task of bringing up responsible, independent, and thoughtful young people, to the creation of a new and fresh generation of Germans. Mann chronicles the success of Hahn's Salem venture: but it was still a cold and rather clinically unsympathetic environment. Hahn "saw puberty as an unavoidable disease that one should try to ignore, to overcome by keeping busy with healthy pleasures and strenuous activity, and, if need be, cold showers. This policy brought a tinge of dishonesty to the life of the school, whose fundamental principle was supposed to be honesty."

As a consequence, Hahn flinched from the role of substitute father in which Golo Mann cast him. "If he ever sensed that his power over a student, over me, for instance, was becoming excessive, he would pull back and observe a strict distance, for he was a thoroughly responsible person." The mixture of distance and affection worked for Golo Mann. His interest in history was encouraged, and he became involved in current affairs through writing class newspapers. He leaves no doubt that he departed from Salem a more stable person than the confused adolescent escaping from domestic Mann oppression in Munich.

There follow some interludes before a new father figure emerges. First comes a spell in the cosmopolitan fleshpots of Berlin that he treats with a rigorous puritanism ("Nothing can be bleaker than entertainment that is not entertaining"), then working as a lignite miner in Lower Lusatia in order to savor an authentically proletarian experience. It is only as a student in Heidelberg, still graced by the dimming specter of Max Weber and the real presence of Weber's widow Marianne, that Golo Mann can find himself once more. This time the support comes from another austerely puritanical and punctiliously correct man —the philosopher Karl Jaspers. Jaspers's wholly admirable behavior in the Third Reich—his commitment to his Jewish wife, his dignified silence, and his refusal to endorse anything connected with the new ideology—lie in the future, but are already present in the man's cold and disciplined morality.

But the reverse side of rectitude is rectitude: Jaspers is as fanatically uncorrupt as Kurt Hahn. He makes the constantly unfavorable comparison of Mann *fils* with Mann *père*. He criticizes Golo Mann's dissertation with the remark that Thomas Mann, "a model to all of us in structuring a work of the mind," would be horrified. The final grade is poor, a meager *cum laude*. The final dinner is mortifying: "It was not very agreeable being alone with the Jasperses."

How far is this personal experience at the root of Golo Mann's account of the failings

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of Weimar democracy, of the political analysis that he interweaves with the personal recollections? At the time, as a student, he described himself as a socialist, who participated in the debates during the depression within the SPD over whether to split away and form a more genuinely progressive party in the light of the SPD leadership's passivity and toleration of the apparently unimaginative program of the conservative Catholic Chancellor Heinrich Brüning. Mann then was all for splitting the party and for greater radicalism.

In retrospect, Golo Mann now calls himself a conservative, who sees past events from a different perspective. Hindsight sheds a new light. Weimar, he now writes, did nothing for the imagination: the politicians, with the possible exception of Gustav Stresemann, could inspire no one. Brüning, though a decent man, was helpless in the face of the economic crisis, and the rising Nazi vote. Like the Mann family, he was forced to flee from Germany after 1933: and impressed everyone with his unimpressiveness. "If you happen to meet abroad the men who occupied the decisive positions at decisive moments, you have your answer; you need seek no further for reasons for the collapse."

But in many ways, Golo Mann's retrospective vision of Weimar was that of Brüning at the time. Brüning, his memoirs and correspondence reveal, after 1930 saw a monarchical restoration as Germany's only chance. Mann now shares the belief that a poetically powerful conservatism alone could have withstood the onslaught of barbarism; and specifically that the problem of Weimar Germany was the absent monarch, that it was an "Empire without an Emperor."

In his last year in Munich living in the parental villa, Mann learned to "make fun of Kaiser Wilhelm." It was very much the fashion —caricaturing the old order had become the ruling fad already before 1914 and satirical magazines such as the Munich *Simplicissimus* set the tone. Later he sees all this joking as quite healthy: the Kaiser, with all his obvious weaknesses and absurdities, had performed a valuable function. "Before 1914 the Germans had laughed a lot, even about political matters; Wilhelm II saw to that; now [in the German Republic] their laughter had dried up. No celebrations, either the solemn, joyous sort or more intimate contacts between the rulers and the ruled." The vigorous culture was a poor substitute: "Literature had blossomed, likewise architecture, painting, music, the theater; and the natural sciences as well. But all these good things cannot really be credited to the Republic. They had been there before . . ."

A great deal of this is without doubt idealization. The absent Kaiser plays the role in politics of the absent father in Golo Mann's personal misery. Trying to recreate a new father, or a substitute father, in the North German Protestant tradition that infuses the Mann family values, produced only distance, coldness, and alienation, not an effective basis for a state. Mann observes accurately how much more narrowly shortsighted were Prussian and German conservatives than their English counterparts. They had neglected the poetic—the element that, after another lost war over a century earlier, the Prussian general Gneisenau had claimed was the basis for the state and the security of the throne.

On top of this defect of the imagination came the specific and crippling constraints of Weimar. Golo Mann quotes the SPD Minister-President of Prussia, Otto Braun, to the effect that Versailles and Moscow destroyed German democracy. On the one hand, the peace treaty "became a symbol of a defeat they refused to accept"; on the other hand, there was the constant threat from the Left. In this interpretation, the old elites are largely blameless: it was not industry or the Reichswehr that destroyed Weimar democracy. In this interpretation, Mann adds, he is supported by the best modern scholarship.

Modern scholarship may not actually provide answers quite as clear or easy as this. Historians will for a long time continue to look for the moments when and how Weimar might have been saved; or at least when a more stable regime, more capable of resisting

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Hitler, might have been instituted. While, for instance, Golo Mann is right to suggest that the brief government of General Kurt von Schleicher put forward some interesting suggestions on ways of overcoming the economic crisis, the extent of Schleicher's support was really quite small. And Schleicher was the man at the center of the intrigue around President von Hindenburg that brought down the Brüning government: the government of a man who had a better worked out vision of how to save Germany than did the political general. It is true that most of German big business did not support Hitler, but neither were the industrial leaders enthusiastic advocates of democracy.

Or again the case of the peace treaty: was Versailles really that disastrous? The external constraint helped to keep German foreign political demands in check in the 1920s; and the adventurist phase in German politics began only after the Treaty had been effectively canceled, through the withdrawal of the last French occupation troops in 1930 and the cancellation of reparations in 1932.

But Golo Mann's general point about the weakness of German political culture is compelling. In his final chapter, he describes vividly the turmoil of 1932: "Germany never had a year so dominated and bedeviled by politics as 1932, neither before or after." It was not just the number of elections (five in one year): it was the way in which every idea seemed malleable and fluid. One moment Golo Mann was taken with socialism, at another by the conservative activism of Leopold Schwarzschild. There were no consistent priorities, no sense of stability.

Such is the verdict of Golo Mann the historian and retrospective analyst, the outsider, rather than Golo Mann the confused insider who believed that the problem lay in the insufficient radicalism of the German socialist party. One of the intriguing and endearing features of the book is the depth of Mann's self-awareness: his willingness to see that the agony and psychological torment of Golo Mann the insider was inseparably mixed up in the Weimar dilemma. "This much," he concludes, "about an individual fate, in this insignificant case my own, and its inextricable connection with the general fate."

Mr. Burnshaw himself

Stanley Burnshaw A Stanley Burnshaw Reader. Introduction by Denis Donoghue. University of Georgia Press, 280 pages, $40; $16.95 paper

reviewed by Robert Richman

A Stanley Burnshaw Reader provides a valuable overview of one of the most unusual —and longest: spanning seven decades— literary careers of our time. In the course of that career, Stanley Burnshaw has written a verse play (*The Bridge*, 1945), a landmark work of poetic theory (*The Seamless Web*, 1970), two novels (*The Sunless Sea*, 1948, and *The Refusers: An Epic of the Jews*, 1981), a biography (*Robert Frost Himself*, 1986), and several volumes of poetry. He has also edited two pioneering anthologies of poems in translation: *The Poem Itself* (1960), in which he attempts to demonstrate that an intimacy with poems written in French, German, and other languages may be achieved through a "simultaneous" reading of the originals and their literal renderings; and *The Modern Hebrew Poem Itself* (1965), organized on the same principle. Almost every facet of Mr. Burnshaw's diverse career is represented in this new *Reader*. The book also contains a checklist of Mr. Burnshaw's writings and an intelligent, if contentious, introduction by Denis Donoghue.

Mr. Burnshaw's career is unusual in two respects. First, it has taken place almost entirely outside of the academy. For years he worked at Henry Holt, then one of the premier publishing houses in New York. It was there that he was Robert Frost's editor. Second, Mr. Burnshaw underwent a momentous shift in political and intellectual perspective in the course of his career. In the Thirties, he was closely aligned with *The New Masses*, one of the most militant Communist

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journals of the period. The best-known episode from this decade was Mr. Burnshaw's review of Wallace Stevens's *Ideas of Order*, in which Stevens was denounced for promoting "the kind of verse that people concerned with murderous world collapse can hardly swallow today except in small doses." The review inspired Stevens to write the poem called "Mr. Burnshaw and the Statue."[1] Yet by the Forties Burnshaw emerged a changed writer, and was expounding ideas about literature that his former colleagues at *The New Masses* would have excoriated.

Mr. Burnshaw's new literary convictions seem to have stemmed, at least in part, from his growing involvement with the poetry of Robert Frost. In Frost's poems, Mr. Burnshaw discovered a world quite unlike the one imagined by the *New Masses* writers. Frost's world was realistic, and yet, at its core, it often seemed enigmatic and—to use Mr. Burnshaw's word—laden with "contrariety." In an excerpt from *Robert Frost Himself* in the *Reader*, Mr. Burnshaw quotes Frost's observation that "each poem clarifies something" in our unpredictable and inconstant world, but—Frost's words again—"then you've got to do it again"—i.e., write new poems—"because confusions keep coming afresh." What Mr. Burnshaw also found appealing in Frost's vision—and this too was more or less alien to the Communist view of the world—was the poet's humility toward, and acceptance of, the "contrariety" of life. "It is not given to man to be omniscient," Mr. Burnshaw again quotes Frost. Such a view of life and art seemed almost designed to undermine the claims of the arrogant radicalism of the *New Masses* mentality.

It was this aspect of Frost's vision—this insistence that we *accept* our world as it is—that so impressed Lionel Trilling. In a lecture on the occasion of Frost's eighty-fifth birthday—the event, which caused quite a stir at the time, is reported by Mr. Burnshaw in *Robert Frost Himself*—Trilling observed that in Frost's poetic world men and women seem "reduced, each in his own way, to some last irreducible core of being," and they also "affirm *this* of themselves; that they are what they are, that this is their truth, and that if the truth be bare, as truth often is, it is far better than a lie." Frost makes plain, Trilling went on, "the terrible things of human life."

Trilling's lecture, which Mr. Burnshaw had arranged, caused a commotion because it exploded forever the myth of Frost as the folksy American poet. No wonder there were so many "angered faces," as Mr. Burnshaw puts it, at the banquet. J. Donald Adams, then a literary columnist at *The New York Times*, "kept shaking his head in fury." As for Frost, he said that he enjoyed being looked into, as Mr. Burnshaw tells it, "more penetratingly" than ever before.

Stanley Burnshaw's agreement with Trilling's opinion of Frost is evident in the extent to which this idea of acceptance imbues Mr. Burnshaw's mature writing. In the 1983 essay entitled "A Future for Poetry: Planetary Maturity," for example, Mr. Burnshaw rejects Dylan Thomas's famous cry to his dying father to "not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light." While Mr. Burnshaw admits that Thomas's cry is a bona fide "creature's cry," it is not, he says, that of a "self-accepting creature's." It is the cry of a "creature who rejects his fate." In *The Seamless Web*, Mr. Burnshaw directs a similar appeal to all poets. Do not forsake your immediate environment, he argues, or attempt to replace it with a new, imagined one. The poet should strive to restore the natural continuum that exists between man and the world—a continuum which, Mr. Burnshaw contends, was ruptured long ago by our subjective, thinking selves.

Acceptance of our lot is also the theme of many of Mr. Burnshaw's poems. In "Anchorage in Time," he writes that if a man chooses to "look up at the sky, let him remember / His anchorage to earth." And in his recent and very moving elegy to his wife, "Message to Someone Four Hundred

1 Stevens's poem was omitted from the *Collected Poems* but was reprinted in *Opus Posthumous*. Mr. Burnshaw's review is included in *A Stanley Burnshaw Reader* and is prefaced by a 1961 memoir that contains many important facts about this episode.

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Nights Away," the poet describes a visit to the house he and his wife built together and shared, now sold and newly occupied. Before long, he realizes that he must leave, "not to return." The dream of return is dismissed; the poet knows he is obliged to accept this separation as permanent and irreversible.

It must be said that Denis Donoghue's introduction to the *Reader* is a very odd piece of work. Mr. Donoghue writes here as a Roman Catholic who expresses irritation that Mr. Burnshaw also calls himself a Jew while eschewing religious belief. Mr. Donoghue rebukes Mr. Burnshaw for the three "refusers," as he calls them, who inhabit some of Burnshaw's poems and books. These "refusers"—Moses; Uriel da Costa, a fifteenth-century Portuguese Catholic who converted to Judaism, only to reject Judaic orthodoxy; and Mr. Burnshaw's father—replaced the God they inherited with one more suitable to their own beliefs. (Mr. Burnshaw, in emulating them, might be a fourth "refuser.") Mr. Donoghue is clearly offended by this free-thinking attitude. "On the argument" between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, he writes, "we"—i.e, Stanley Burnshaw and Denis Donoghue—"will never come to an agreement."

Mr. Donoghue is a stern interrogator, and one can't help but wonder why Mr. Burnshaw agreed to an introduction of this sort. Does he still harbor a lingering desire for the kind of dogma and orthodoxy he long ago rejected in both religion and politics? Perhaps. But if so, he has also come to believe that the only way to triumph over orthodoxy is to confront it.

Who killed literature?

Alvin Kernan The Death of Literature. Yale University Press, 230 pages, $22.50

reviewed by D. G. Myers

What is now called "literature" was born in the eighteenth century. Before then there was writing, but no authors; printed texts, but no publishing. For literature is not a *thing* like a chair, the essence of which can be wrapped up for all time in a tidy formula—the imitation of human action, the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings, the criticism of life—but is instead a social practice, undertaken at a distinct time and in a distinct place, requiring certain institutional arrangements for its support. And the institutions that sustain literature in our day have all arisen since the Enlightenment. The image of the artist as a special person, a creative individual devoted to a sacred calling, exempt from the cash nexus, whose one obligation is to realize his inner vision—this is merely the ideology of romanticism and modernism. It gives literature the appearance of belonging to an autonomous, elevated sphere of human life, but in reality literature is saggingly dependent upon such aspects of modern society as high literacy rates, copyright law, the taboo against plagiarism, dictionaries with prescriptions on usage, research libraries, criticism, scholarship, and the university curriculum. It would be a mistake to conceive of literature as having an existence apart from such things.

Something like this is the intellectual background to Professor Alvin Kernan's new book, *The Death of Literature*. It is a view familiar to anyone who has read much literary scholarship in recent years. Although Kernan calls his book "a piece of literary history," it is more accurately to be described as a meditation upon what has been established—or, at least, asserted—by the brightest young literary scholars now working in the best universities. Their basic argument is a frankly Marxist one: literature, capitalism, and the political conception of the individual all emerged at about the same time, in response to the same material conditions. There is no reason to believe in or honor any of these things—there is no "transcendent ground" for them—outside a subservience to the power that maintains the political conditions that give rise to them in the first place.

Kernan directs little fresh thought onto such questions. But what keeps his book

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from being "tenth transmissions of stock ideas" (as the great classicist Basil Gildersleeve once dismissed another scholar's book) is his effort to bring these ideas together into a whole and provide a composite portrait of advanced literary thinking at the present moment. If these are not the best ideas, they are certainly the most current. And if *The Death of Literature* is not a better book, the reason is that the ideas are not better. Yet the book is not without its uses. It is the first attempt to put the latest findings of literary scholarship into some kind of order, to arrange them into a coherent view, and it is a highly intelligent attempt to do so. It might even have been entitled *The English-Studies World View*.

Although the central propositions of his book are derived from Marxist thinking, Kernan himself is no Marxist. He merely swings the club from the other end. Literature is dying, in his view, because the institutions that sustain it are antiquated or in decay. But some of these institutions are *good*. As a scholar—he is now Avalon Professor of Humanities Emeritus at Princeton—Kernan is committed to such things as the reading of books and the university teaching of literature, although he is not sanguine about their future. The fortunes of books and literature have been hitched to printing. "So central has print been to literature," Kernan says, "that it is no exaggeration to say that literature has historically been the system of print culture." Print culture, though, is on the way out. Comes the dawn of electronic media, which make it less interesting and less important to read books, and bye bye, literature.

Nor is it likely to find sanctuary in the university. The academic study of literature is plagued by two problems that its exponents have never been able to overcome. First, no one can say with any assurance what literature *is*. Kernan dwells amusingly on the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* obscenity trial, at which British scholars and critics were unable to agree on a definition of literature. Second, there is no single discipline of literary study. Modern criticism is a caterwaul of screeching, dogmatic "movements." Neither method nor logic unites them. "Not only does [literary study] continue to fail to meet the academic requirement that true knowledge define the object it studies and systematize its analytic method to at least some modest degree," Kernan laments, "but it seems to have chosen a disruptive role within the system." The brightest young literary scholars see it as their duty to corrode liberal, democratic ideals.

For Kernan, then, it is no happenstance that "a radical type of literary criticism," one that calls into question "the central literary activities of reading and writing," should have developed in step with the decline of literary culture. And yet it is not his intention to abuse such types of criticism as deconstruction. Although he recognizes that deconstruction has largely been "the instrument of aggressive, alienated, left-leaning political and social attitudes," Kernan does not blame it. In his view, deconstruction is not a *cause* of the present distemper in literature, but merely another of its *conditions*. Seen in the proper light, deconstruction "begins to look far less melodramatic and more like criticism at its traditional social function of preserving whatever can be saved in a time of radical questioning of basic institutional values and beliefs." After all, despite its contempt for objective truth and determinate meaning, deconstruction presupposes the extraordinary importance of literature. Indeed, deconstruction blithely assumes that the entire world of human experience is to be unraveled as a literary text.

Outside the wards of criticism, however, literature is unlikely to survive. The institution of literature, Kernan says—individual works, writers' lives, the teaching of classic texts, the whole shebang—exists in order to serve "the general social aim of constructing some kind of believable and acceptable Lebenswelt." But the Lebenswelt is coming unglued. "Not only the arts but all our traditional institutions, the family and the law, religion and the state, have in recent years been coming apart in startling ways," Kernan observes. From this perspective, the death of

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literature merely reflects the general social collapse.

This is a view I can enter into as gladly as anyone, just because it requires one to stay innocent of politics. But I don't think it has very much to tell us about literature, certainly not about the real problems that confront writing and criticism in our time. In fact, it might be asked if some such view—the fundamental belief that "the existence of literature is intertwined with," as Kernan puts it, "other social realities"—is not itself one of the problems facing literature. It is rather like the argument that playing a piano and driving a car are at bottom the same activity, since they both involve sitting. The social view of literature proclaims that the social life is the only life humans lead, denying that a person who is alone, silent, reading a book from another place and time, reliving thoughts and expressions which have ceased to have a social life, is doing anything more than contributing to the general social aim. If there is any idea that is guaranteed to menace literature, to prevent it from offering a refuge and alternative to some kind of believable and acceptable Lebenswelt, that is it.

Shorter notices

Katherine Frank A Chainless Soul:
A Life of Emily Brontë.
Houghton Mifflin, 303 pages, $21.95

A more apt title for this psychobiography of Emily Brontë would be *A Soulfood Chain*. It argues, you see, for a strong connection between Emily Brontë's artistic sensibility and her eating habits. The willowy, stubborn child of the moors who never loved, but who knew all about tempestuous passion and wrote about it in lyric poetry and *Wuthering Heights*, was anorexic. Or so biographer Katherine Frank has decided to claim.

Emily Brontë, like her sisters Charlotte and Anne, lived in her imagination. Even more so than they, she shunned contact with society and reveled in a life of cooking and cleaning for her widowed clergyman father at the rugged Haworth parsonage. She died at age thirty of the tuberculosis to which her family was prone (it claimed the lives of her siblings Maria, Elizabeth, and Branwell Brontë before her, Miss Frank reports.)

The Emily Brontë who emerges from this book does seem to have the nunlike purity and unearthly imaginative powers of such purported anorexics as St. Catherine of Siena. But no evidence is presented to bolster Frank's suggestion that her subject wrote beautiful poetry under the influence of "trance-like states—provoked perhaps by hunger and fasting." In three cases Brontë apparently refused to eat so that her father would do her bidding: once so a favorite servant who had fallen ill would be allowed to remain at Haworth, and twice so she would not have to stay at boarding school. The minute she returned to the parsonage she was happy, as Frank tells us time and time again to the detriment of her case. Consider the three or four "diary papers," a sort of family newsletter Emily Brontë would jot down every few years, which are the only personal writings that have survived. These describe the sturdy contentment of a very forward-looking English girl. She writes, in one fairly typical passage, "merely desiring that everybody should be as comfortable as myself and as undesponding, and then we should have a very tolerable world of it."

It is too bad Charlotte Brontë, whose correspondence gave posterity most of what it knows about her younger sister Emily, was a plump woman. As Frank portrays her, she fits the psychological profile of the anorexic much better. As the one who sought public recognition of her family's talents, she had many disappointments and wrote many a despairing letter. Frank takes it from there, alleging, for instance, that the failure of Charlotte Brontë's dream of founding a private school so she and her sisters could stop slaving away as other people's governesses gave her a "gnawing sense of powerlessness" that "led to an obsession with control." Frank goes on: "Hadn't Charlotte herself always been the stronger, older, more practical one, protecting her younger, frail, eccentric,

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reclusive sister? Now it was Emily who was large and strong. Charlotte could not consume the food Emily cooked for her, could not eat or write at the dining room table."

It could be the biographer has strained a point to oblige her publisher with an "original" angle. Or it could be that Frank was very attached to her provocative thesis, which Houghton Mifflin decided could be padded out to book length. Frank's method of padding, it must be said, is the very worst. Quoting passages from letters or poems, she provides "expository analysis" by repeating the passages nearly word for word, as in: "'We are all about to divide, break up, separate,' [Charlotte] reported, emphasizing the fragmentation of the family with the three forceful verbs, 'divide,' 'break up' and 'separate.'"

One imagines this work as the twenty-page essay it should have been, nestling harmlessly in one of the academic journals. Some *Gastromysticism Monthly*—or perhaps a *Cahiers de Culinary Deconstruction*, if there is one—would have just eaten it up.

—*Lauren Weiner*

Lucy R. Lippard Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America. Pantheon, 280 pages, $50; $24.95 paper

The biographical note at the end of *Mixed Blessings* informs us that Lucy Lippard has written fourteen books. One assumes that the present volume makes it fifteen. In any event, the list of honors and distinctions that follows—honorary degrees, exhibitions that Miss Lippard has organized, publications she has edited or helped to start—reminds us that over the last two and a half decades this prolific "writer and activist" has come to be taken seriously indeed by the "cutting edge" art establishment.

Though she describes *Mixed Blessings* modestly as an "egalitarian collage," Miss Lippard frequently pauses to tell readers that she has expended immense effort attempting to register the staggeringly diverse efflorescence of art—or what we might more accurately call art-like phenomenona—in North and Central America "*now*, in 1990, two years before the five-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's accidental invasion of the Americas." In other words, *Mixed Blessings* is meant to be a charter document in the multiculturalist onslaught now besieging us. Miss Lippard likes to be thought of as breaking new ground. So new is the ground she breaks here that language itself threatens to fail her. She wistfully admits this, begging our indulgence for what she accurately sums up as the "web of ungainly, pompous, condescending, and even ugly language" that festoons the book. When one is embarked on such a bold intellectual voyage, what's a bit of barbarous diction?

Mixed Blessings is not organized chronologically or geographically or thematically. To the extent that it is organized at all, it is organized "conceptually." The quotation marks are essential, for in proper postmodernist fashion Miss Lippard does not employ concepts, she merely dispenses jargon. Impressive abstractions float about in great profusion, untethered to anything so mundane as reality. The five chapters of the book boast enigmatic titles like "Mapping," "Telling," "Naming," and "Turning Around," but are basically indistinguishable from one another. Yet the message is clear. "Turnaround," Miss Lippard explains for the etymologically innocent, "is a literal synonym for 'revolution.'" And "revolution"—albeit at a safe distance—is Miss Lippard's real passion, not art. Already in the acknowledgments we read that this book supposedly devoted to new art in the Americas owes much "to the U.S. Solidarity movement with Central America, to the cultural vitality of the Nicaraguan Revolution and the FMLN in El Salvador, and to the vital young artists of Cuba." When we get to the text proper, we are inundated with one political cliché after the next: "changing demographics make the abolition of Eurocentricism necessary to everyone's survival"; "the Central-American church divided between corrupt support for U.S.-backed oligarchies and mercenaries and the healing empowerment of Liberation Theol-

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ogy"; "politicized artists concerned with outreach into their communities and the decommodification of art"; "[g]entrification on the multicultural Lower East Side . . . is a cultural issue like the desecration of indigenous burial grounds and sacred sites"; "[a]ll white people, no matter how well-meaning, are racists to some degree by virtue of living in a racist society." As Quintilian said about the education of the young orator, without natural gifts technical rules are useless. Miss Lippard clearly has a gift for this sort of thing. It is, to be sure, a narrow gift, but she works it for all it's worth.

What makes it possible for Miss Lippard to indulge in this orgy of politicized banality is her willed and programmatic blindness to art. In a key passage, she tells us that "The notion of Quality has been the most effective bludgeon on the side of homogeneity in the modernist and postmodernist periods . . ." That is to say, artistic achievement does not matter, only politics does. Very, very few of the artists discussed in this book will be familiar to most readers. Very, very few of them should be. They have been chosen not for their talent or artistic accomplishment, but for their ethnic heritage and adherence to political sentiments of which Miss Lippard approves. This makes *Mixed Blessings* worthless as an exercise in art criticism, though alarming as a symptom of cultural decay. It is not a mixed blessing; it is an unmixed disaster.

—Roger Kimball

Robert Phelps and Jerry Rosco, editors
Continual Lessons: The Journals of Glenway Wescott 1937-1955. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 410 pages, $27.95

Though Glenway Wescott (1901-1987) was one of the most promising young novelists of the Twenties, his productivity plummeted in later decades, and he didn't publish a word of fiction after *Apartment in Athens* (1945). Readers curious about his long silence will be fascinated by his journals, which recall Ned Rorem's celebrated diaries. Like Rorem, Wescott was a Midwestern boy, a Paris prodigy, and then a man-about-Manhattan, where he found ample opportunities to name-drop ("I am dining with Mrs. Astor, after all—her canceling . . . her dinner party was just to punish Monroe for committing infidelity with Mrs. Rockefeller"). Like Rorem, Wescott was homosexual, narcissistic, and promiscuous, and (in his diaries) candid about all three; like Rorem, he was a believer in craft and Gallic elegance.

Yet Wescott's career, unlike Rorem's, ground to an early halt, and the journals help explain why. His brother and sister-in-law —who provided him with an income and a house on their New Jersey farm—considered homosexuality a crippling disorder, and Wescott's willingness to be patronized by them (in every sense of the word) strikes one as self-destructive, a capitulation to their verdict that made it a self-fulfilling prophecy. Though he complains of his "loss of nerve," his "love of unfinishable perfection," and his "weakness, foolishness, self-indulgence," the bottom line would seem to be that he was an autobiographically motivated writer whose remorse over his sexual leanings not only prompted him to become a family captive but ultimately rendered him artistically mute.

Paradoxically, however, even as Wescott took (in his words) a "dark view" of homosexuality, his cluttered coital calendar afforded him cheap self-esteem. Indeed, as his output dwindled, his ego fed increasingly upon his libidinous exploits, which Wescott (a major, and pathetically eager, source for Kinsey's data on sexual behavior) discusses as if they were artworks. "There are more plots in our lives than in our books," he notes, and he's not exaggerating: though Monroe Wheeler (the longtime director of exhibitions and publications at the Museum of Modern Art) was his consort for nearly seventy years, Wescott—a self-described "triangular man"—was more at home in a triad than in a couple, maintaining in his household a post that one might term "auxiliary lover." Add the sundry third-tier beaux, pick-ups, and threesomes and foursomes with various combinations of the

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above, and it's impossible to keep the names straight without a scorecard. If at times love walked in, moreover, Wescott can be remarkably callous about these amours, writing at fifty-one: "Carl's in despair . . . therefore no more fondness, no more fun. Michael has ceased to charm me. Insoluble pity of the poverty-stricken life and the psychology of Tommy. Disillusionment in dearest Ronald. . . ."

Why so baroque a love life? One gathers that promiscuity was at once Wescott's way of asserting independence from his family, of evading self-examination (he confesses to a "dread of being left absolutely to my own devices"), and of surmounting—one tumble at a time, anyway—his insecurity, mostly about his talent. And there was, with each year, more to surmount. In the Forties Maugham asks him: "Whatever gave you the idea, whatever made you think, that you had the talent to be a novelist?" By 1954 Wheeler "despairs of me." And a year later Wescott complains to the family maid that his mother talks to him as if he were fifteen. (Her reply: "Yes, I know, you poor thing.") In the first half of 1953 his literary earnings totaled $6.88. It reads like a writer's worst nightmare. Was his life, then, tragic? Wescott says no, averring the "happiness of my life in the essentials," and insisting that all he really wants is "pleasure, pleasure, pleasure." Yet there are passages here—such as the one wherein he declares his longing to make his nearest and dearest "proud of me"—that stir one's deepest pity. Astors or no Astors, one trembles to imagine what it must have been like for this self-despising, self-deceiving soul to carry on for thirty-two more barren years.

—*Bruce Bawer*

David Lodge After Bakhtin:
Essays on Fiction and Criticism.
Routledge, 198 pages, $45; $14.95 paper

David Lodge's sprightly novels about academics entertain not least by dramatizing how "the very difficulty and esotericism of theory make it all the more effective for purposes of professional identification, apprenticeship and assessment." But it is only in the last chapter (just cited) of *After Bakhtin*, his new collection of essays on fiction and fiction theory, that Professor Lodge's comic voice can be heard as he there offers a droll *tour d'horizon* of the fissiparous and internecine ways of American academe. The rest of the book is largely devoted to applying the literary theories of the Russian Formalist Mikhail Bakhtin to English novels. But just as the final chapter satirizes career theorists, so the introduction informs us elegiacally that he plans to give up the very sort of academic criticism we are about to read. Thus the book is sandwiched, like a medieval romance written by a repentant monk, between a retraction and a flyting.

Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) seems to have been a heroic and compelling figure who elaborated prodigies of humane scholarship and thought deep in the Stalinist night; two ideas of his are especially influential today: 1) prose fiction lends itself to "dialogic" language, in which the author allows "characters to articulate different ideological positions without subordinating them to his own authorial speech" and thus makes "interpretive closure in the absolute sense impossible" (Dostoevsky was Bakhtin's text here); 2) prose fiction developed from and loves to incorporate parody, travesty, the carnivalesque, which all function as a "continuous critique of all repressive, authoritarian, one-eyed ideologies" (Rabelais was Bakhtin's text here). It is the former notion, fiction's affinity for a "polyphonic" democracy of voice and a tolerant suspending of judgment, that Professor Lodge pursues in such writers as George Eliot, Lawrence, Joyce, and James.

Of *Middlemarch* we learn that "it is precisely because the narrator's discourse is never entirely unambiguous, predictable, and in total interpretative control of the other discourses . . . that the novel survives, to be read and re-read, without ever being finally closed and exhausted." This seems a perverse and piddling reduction of the moral majesty of Eliot, whose verdicts on, say, Bulstrode and Rosamond *are* closed. What is

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this horror of "closure," anyway? In Bakhtin, it may have been a sort of transferred loathing of Bolshevism (although any theory that exalts Dostoevsky over Tolstoy seems ipso facto dubious to me); in many academics, it is a rote hatred of the West and of meaning; in Lodge, it seems a mode of squirming out from under Leavis's perceived rigidities. And yet how much more adequate and real was Leavis precisely on the inequalities of *Middlemarch*!

Lodge finds evenhandedness and balance in *Women in Love* and warns against the "danger that, in the process of trying to extract a coherent body of thought from the novel, one will 'monologize' it." I should think there is little danger of many extractions of coherent thought from Lawrence, but Lodge's anxiety is characteristic. His (oddly Leavisite) case for the tolerant properties of this supremely hectoring book is weak, despite the apparent equipoise of the argument on its final page.

Ulysses offers a field day for the deployment of Bakhtinian categories and subcategories. Gerty MacDowell's shore reverie is thus parsed: "It is neither diegesis nor mimesis, nor a blend of the two, but a kind of pseudo-diegesis achieved by the mimesis not of a character's speech but of a discourse, the discourse of cheap women's magazines at the turn of the century." Compare Hugh Kenner writing in plain English: "We have not merely a transcription of Gerty's thoughts. We have a delicately adjusted relationship between mature emotion, novelistic clichés, Gerty's way of perceiving her own feelings, and Gerty's feelings themselves." Which is the more sensitive and subtle analysis? Case closured.

Lodge's most successful essay here is a jargon-free introduction, for Penguin Classics, to James's *Spoils of Poynton*. For once, paradoxically, he makes a convincing case for a novel's being *about* hesitation and indeterminacy.

The largest claims have been made for Bakhtin as the Aristotle of fiction, the definer of its modes and moral aptitudes. The jury is not yet impaneled, but David Lodge *qua* critic will, I fear, be called by the prosecution.

—*Donald Lyons*

Editor's note: We wish to call attention to the publication of *The Mail from Anywhere* by Brad Leithauser (Knopf, $18.95) and *The Six-Cornered Snowflake* by John Frederick Nims (New Directions, $18.95; $9.95 paper). Some of the poems in these collections appeared previously in *The New Criterion*.

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Notebook

German music in America and England

by Samuel Lipman

This past fall, the Philadelphia Orchestra selected the German conductor Wolfgang Sawallisch as its new Music Director, succeeding the Italian Riccardo Muti. In so doing, Philadelphia was following in the footsteps of the New York Philharmonic, who last spring chose the German conductor Kurt Masur as its new leader, succeeding the Indian Zubin Mehta. There are indeed significant artistic and career differences between Sawallisch and Masur: perhaps the most important difference between them is Sawallisch's identification with the opera house, whereas Masur's image is that of a performer of orchestral music.

But there is one similarity among these two men that bears repeating, and should provide us with much food for thought about the future of American musical life. Both conductors, whether in the orchestral or in the operatic literature, are authentic and unabashed representatives of the German musical tradition, a tradition which of course very much includes Austria. In an important sense, this linkage of German conductors with German music is as it should be. Sawallisch (b. 1923) and Masur (b. 1927) were each trained in Germany and have lived their professional lives in Germany. Sawallisch's most consequential tenure has been as General Music Director of the Bavarian Staatsoper in Munich since 1971; Masur's most lengthy appointment has been as conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus orchestra since 1970.

Their repertory, too, is authentically and unabashedly German; Sawallisch has made his greatest mark in the operas of Richard Strauss; Masur's achievement lies in the German orchestral music of the first half of the nineteenth century. In this regard, it is fascinating to look at these artists' currently available recordings. Sawallisch's recorded repertory is centered around Beethoven, Brahms, Bruckner, Dvořák, Haydn, Mendelssohn, Mozart, Pfitzner, Schubert, Schumann, Strauss, and Weber. What is true for Sawallisch is equally true for Masur, for on records Masur now offers us Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Liszt, Mahler, Mendelssohn, and Schubert; his excursions into what might be termed more cosmopolitan music go no further than works by Dvořák, Sibelius, and Tchaikowsky, all composers stemming (for all their distinctive national sound) from German symphonism.

There can be little doubt that during their American years both Sawallisch and Masur will stick to their lasts, and in the main conduct the marvelous music, German rather than French or Russian, with which they are so closely identified. What will happen to the rest of the orchestral repertory under this policy? So far as post-World War I and especially post-World War II music is concerned, the answer has been known for many years: whatever new or new-ish music is to appear on Philadelphia Orchestra or New York Philharmonic concert programs will not be conducted by their Music Directors. What is

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only now becoming clear is that the repertory these men are bringing with them will be constricted in quite another way; this constriction will be produced by considerations not of origin in time, but rather of origin in a particular tradition.

Can these constrictions in repertory be mitigated by the many guest conductors who undoubtedly will be invited to lead these orchestras for varying, but always short, periods? After all, both of these conductors will be coming to America to lead orchestras with extended, virtually year-round, seasons. On the average, they will each devote approximately twenty weeks to their respective orchestras; the remainder of the weeks—in actuality more than half the year—must be filled by visitors. But as the old saw goes, the Devil should not have all the good tunes. Even guest conductors must be allowed to program their share of masterpieces, and under the new German dispensation, the operational definition of masterpiece will increasingly be shaped by the same criteria that have so plainly been applied to the choosing of these two German conductors as music directors.

This codification of the musical canon is hardly surprising. It has been coming for a century, and is the reality underlying the fame of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms as "the three 'B's." It goes without saying that the canon has been ever thus in German-speaking countries; in the other countries of Europe the orchestral repertory has been based on German music, with a leavening provided by more or less limited examples, more rather than less subsidized, of the local national product.

There was a time in American musical life—say from the end of World War I through the 1950s—when this German primacy, though hardly eliminated, was somewhat diminished. Those were the days when American orchestras were directed not only by Germanic conductors, but also by such non-Germans as Serge Koussevitsky, Leopold Stokowski, Pierre Monteux, and, of course, Arturo Toscanini. Neither Koussevitsky nor Stokowski was admired in the German core repertory; their fortes lay in the exciting playing of lesser-known music of other styles and nationalisms. Monteux and Toscanini were marvelous in the German repertory, but they (each in a different way) brought to its performance distinctively French (with Monteux) and Italian (with Toscanini) qualities.

In recent years, American orchestras have attempted to continue this international approach, bringing to our shores conductors like Mehta in New York, Muti in Philadelphia, and the Japanese Seiji Ozawa in Boston. These conductors have failed most signally in their performances of the great German repertory demanded, now as always, by musicians and audiences alike. It is to fill this vacuum that Wolfgang Sawallisch and Kurt Masur have been brought in. What their coming tells us is that the Germans have triumphed in high musical culture, not with their new music, but with their old. In music at least, the trend is back to basics.

A quick trip to London this past November provided fresh evidence of just how interesting great German composition remains, even when the music in question is relatively unfamiliar. On this occasion, the London Mozart Players, a chamber orchestra selected (I suspect) from the large pool of efficient instrumentalists for which the English capital is famous, came to the Queen Elizabeth Hall on the South Bank for a semi-staged performance of Richard Strauss's glorious incidental music to the Molière classic *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme* (usually translated as "The Would-be Gentleman").

Much of this finely wrought music, in the form of the 1916 orchestral suite *Der Burger als Edelmann*, is indeed a beloved part of the orchestral repertory. It has long been known that Strauss's purpose in writing the incidental music in the first place was to accompany the version of the Molière play made by Hugo von Hofmannsthal, and it has also long been known that Strauss wrote a great deal more music for this purpose than he eventually decided to include in the suite. The Strauss-Hofmannsthal collaboration

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was fruitful, but not untroubled; the partners worked best, it seemed, by letter. The composer had a simple and direct mind, the writer a subtle and devious one. If anything, each of these great artists suffered from too many, never too few, ideas.

Nowhere was this surfeit of ideas more the case than in the Molière project. It began life about 1910 as the outer wrappings of what we now know as *Ariadne auf Naxos*, which was originally intended to be an opera-within-a-play, a mere entertainment (itself combining *opera seria* and *commedia dell'arte*) offered to Monsieur Jourdain's guests. It is impossible here to go into the tangled history of this mammoth play-opera combination; suffice it to say that the original—and very lengthy—mélange was a failure on its 1911 premiere in Stuttgart, and fared no better two years later in London.

But the London performance was a star-studded event, with the famous actor Herbert Beerbohm Tree (the half-brother of Max Beerbohm) as both star in the title role and producer; Thomas Beecham (not yet a baronet) was the conductor, and the translator was the playwright and novelist Somerset Maugham. So dispiriting was the outcome of the London production—which ran a mere eight performances—that according to Ted Morgan in his 1980 Maugham biography, it "seemed to many critics conclusive evidence that Molière cannot be done in English." Indeed, in his description Morgan doesn't even mention the contributions of Strauss and Hofmannsthal. It is thus hardly surprising that it was thought for many years that Maugham's translation was lost or in some way unavailable for staging, and it was the London Mozart Players' intelligent idea to resurrect, in an edited and shortened form, the Strauss-Hofmannsthal work in Maugham's words.[1]

Queen Elizabeth Hall seemed the ideal place for this bright venture. The hall, visually handsome and seating a bit more than one thousand, makes possible both intimacy and impressiveness; on this night —only a few hours before Mrs. Thatcher's resignation—the black-tie London audience, led by H.R.H. The Prince Edward (in his capacity as the Patron of the Mozart Players), appeared prosperous and even glamorous. On stage, the actors (some of them singers as well) stood in front of conductor, orchestra, and chorus, strutting their stuff on a large red Afghan rug, alas of recent rather than antique origin. Taken together, audience and performers looked like nothing so much as guests at a very fancy and well-mannered party.

Unfortunately, intellectual daring does not always result in musical distinction, and glamour does not always make for musical satisfaction. The actors read their lines, often laboriously, from scripts they held up high, one presumes so that the words might be more easily visible. The already sufficiently sparkling Molière-Hofmannsthal-Maugham lines—there is a Turkish masquerade at the end—were burlesqued; the prize in this area was won by the actor playing a Turk, who repeatedly pronounced the word "you" (as in "you know") as "jew."

Moreover, the musical shortcomings of the evening perhaps exceeded the dramatic. If it can be judged from her tendency to make the same motions at the same time with both arms, Jane Glover, the conductor and the Mozart Players' director, comes all too clearly out of the world of oratorio and chorus. Her approach to Strauss was literal and superficial; her tempos often seemed heedlessly fast, not because they were quicker than Strauss's markings but because she seems to lack a feeling for graceful phrase endings and delicate rubatos.

Then too, the orchestra itself seemed wanting. Strauss wrote for an orchestra of thirty-seven, with his writing a kind of expanded

1 It should be mentioned that in the fairly recent past two conductors, Erich Leinsdorf and Gerard Schwarz, have performed the complete Strauss incidental music to the play, but in a performing edition that ingeniously substitutes a newly commissioned narrative by the poet Richard Wilbur for the dialogue of Molière and Hofmannsthal. Even this version, despite its very real merits, has never been recorded.

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chamber music. When so few players are involved, each musician's role is exposed to aural scrutiny. The London Mozart Players seem short on both ensemble cohesion and the kind of separate virtuosity Strauss demands. The important solos with which the work abounds were scanted, with smudged notes legion. The trumpet passage that begins the Act I scene of the Fencing Master was badly flubbed; the brief but notoriously difficult piano passage that immediately follows was, to put it kindly, shabby; the violin solos were often out-of-tune and labored. Overall, there was a slapdash air to the orchestral playing, as if there had been a premium put on getting the performance together quickly rather than on getting to the music.

Sadly, this evening at the Queen Elizabeth Hall only reinforced the general impression that English musical life is stronger on thinking than on playing. It was no accident that the Maugham translation of this enticing work was done at this time in London rather than in New York; it is scarcely thinkable that such an expensive and elegant risk, so hard to get together and so limited in audience appeal, would now be undertaken at Lincoln Center, our counterpart to London's South Bank. But if it were put on here, it would undoubtedly be better performed and better led. Perhaps that is one of the meanings of the presently much-talked-about special relationship between England and America: they can think, and we can play. Meanwhile, hats off to Richard Strauss, whose music will easily survive even the London Mozart Players.

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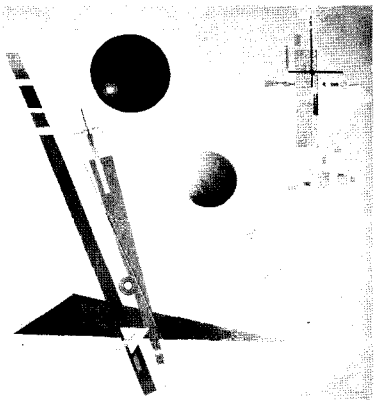

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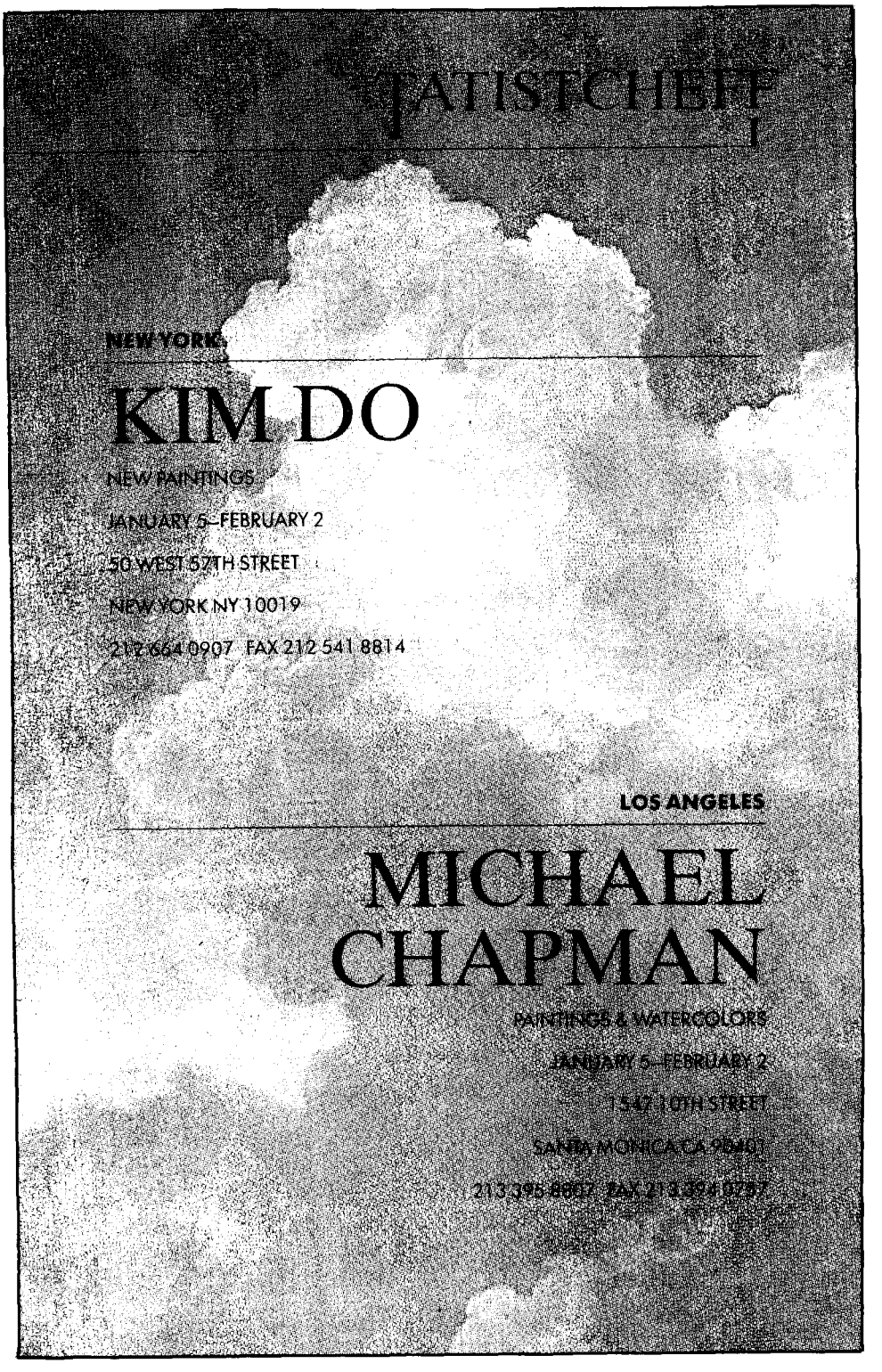

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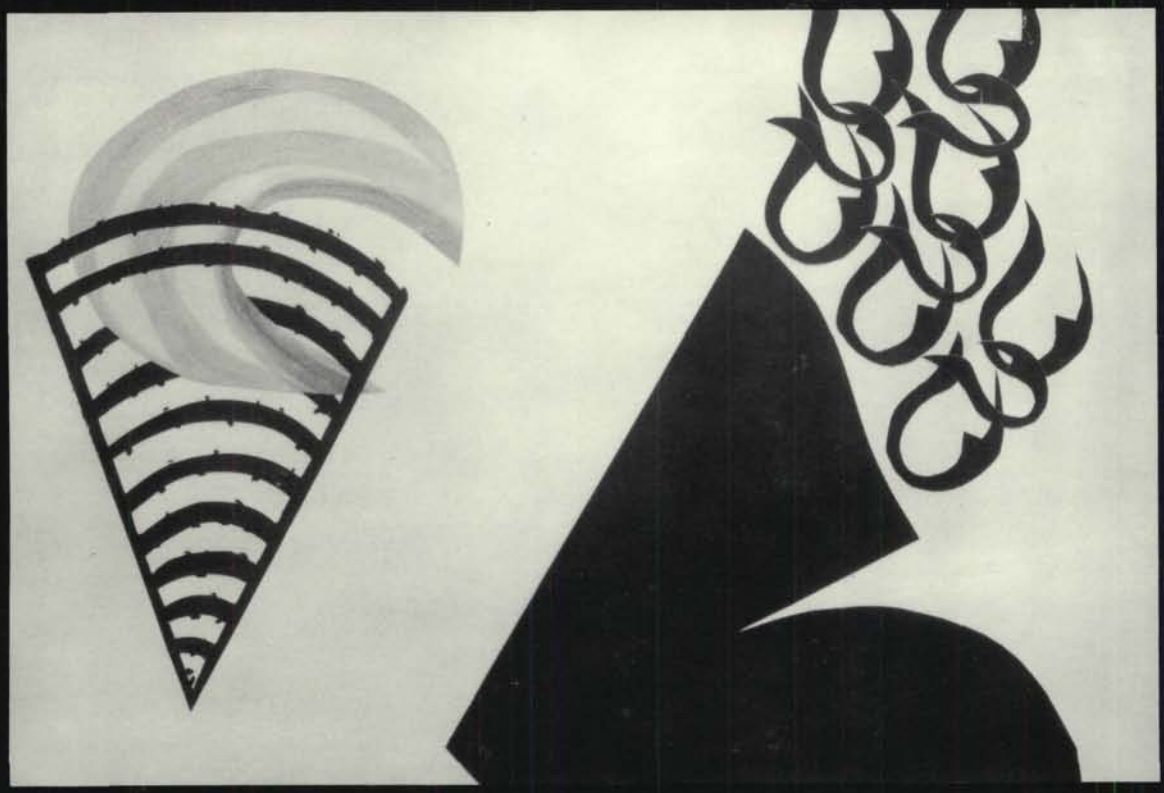

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